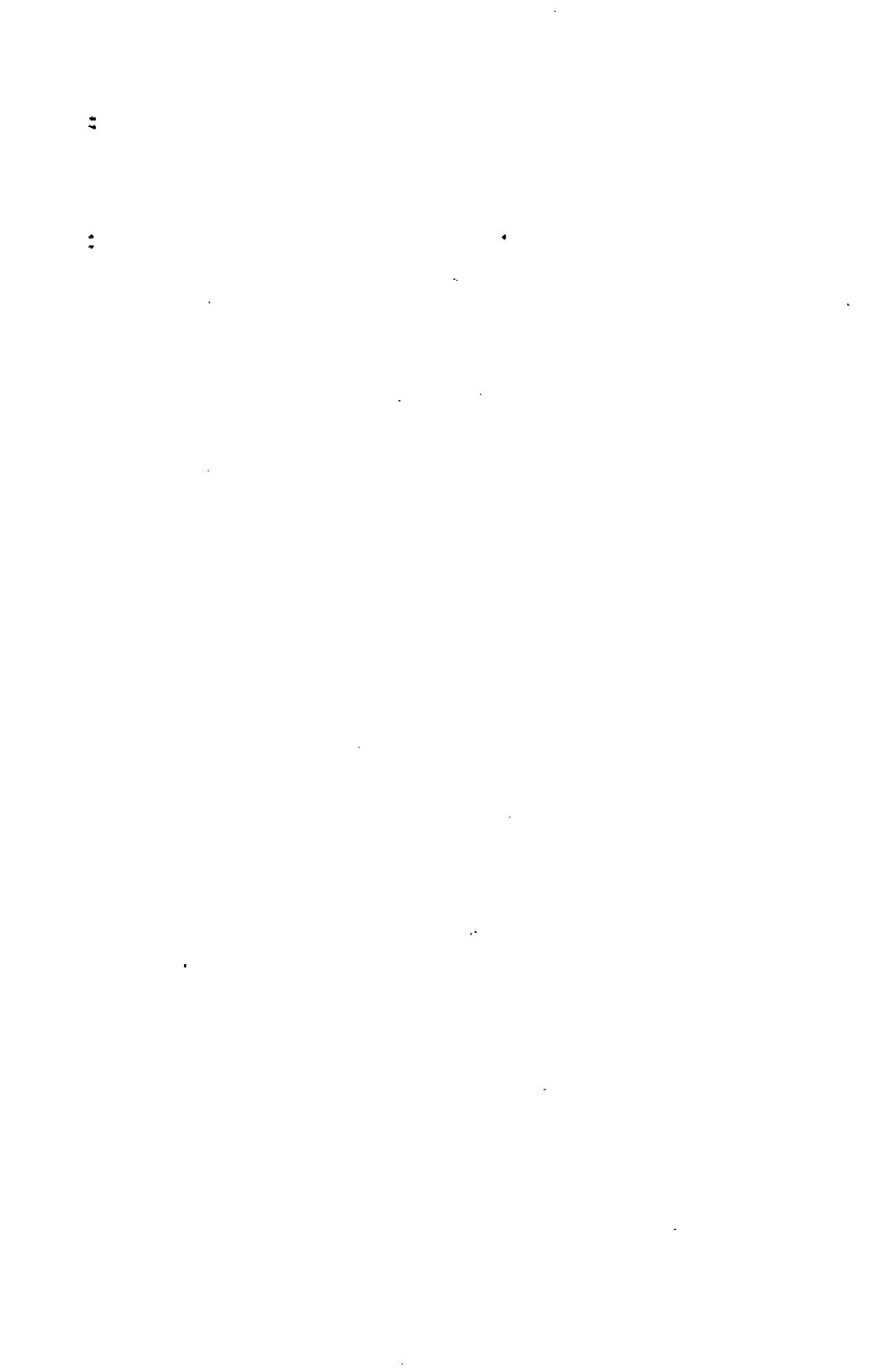
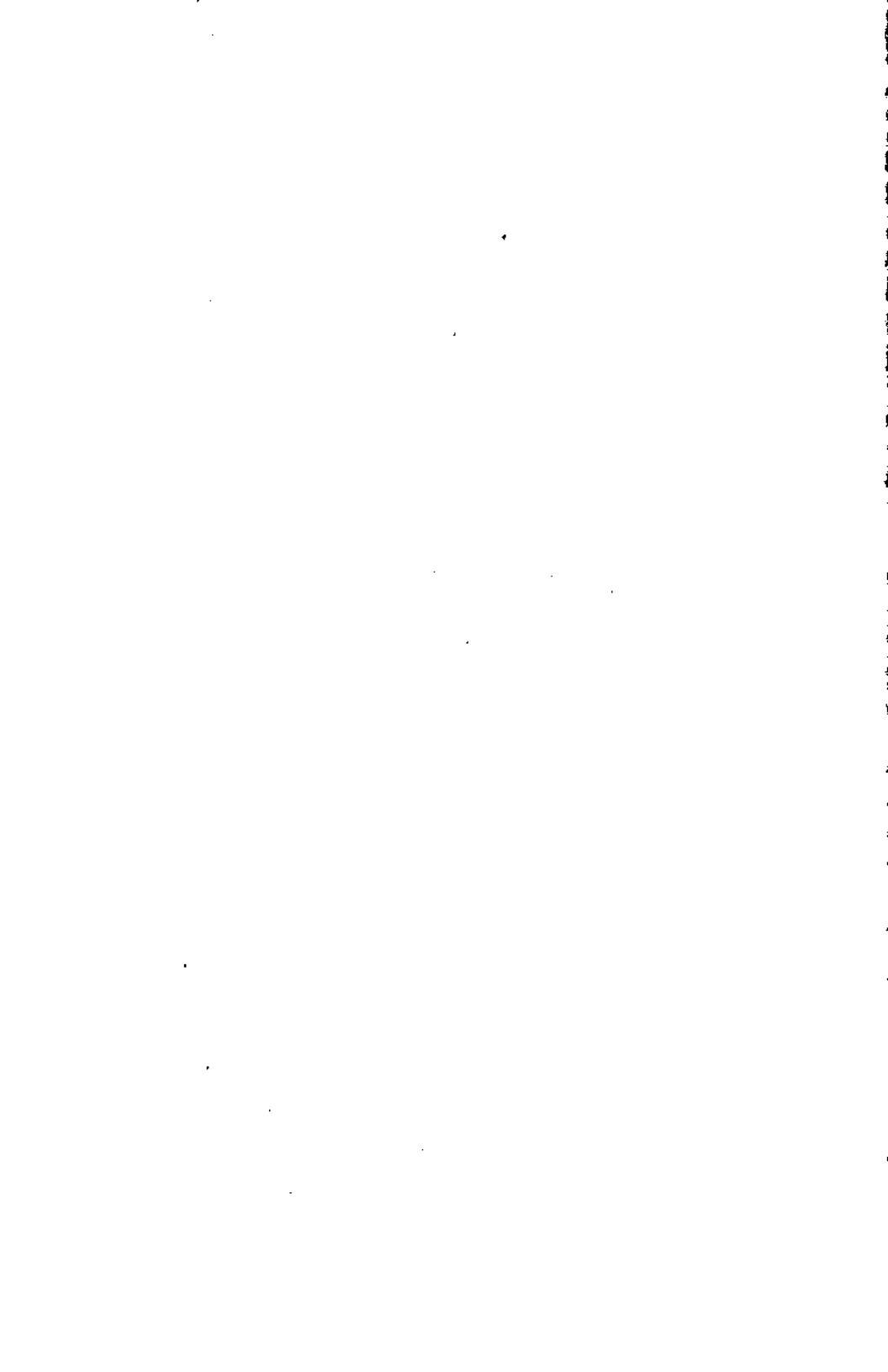


THE POCKET
JOHN CHARLES McNEILL









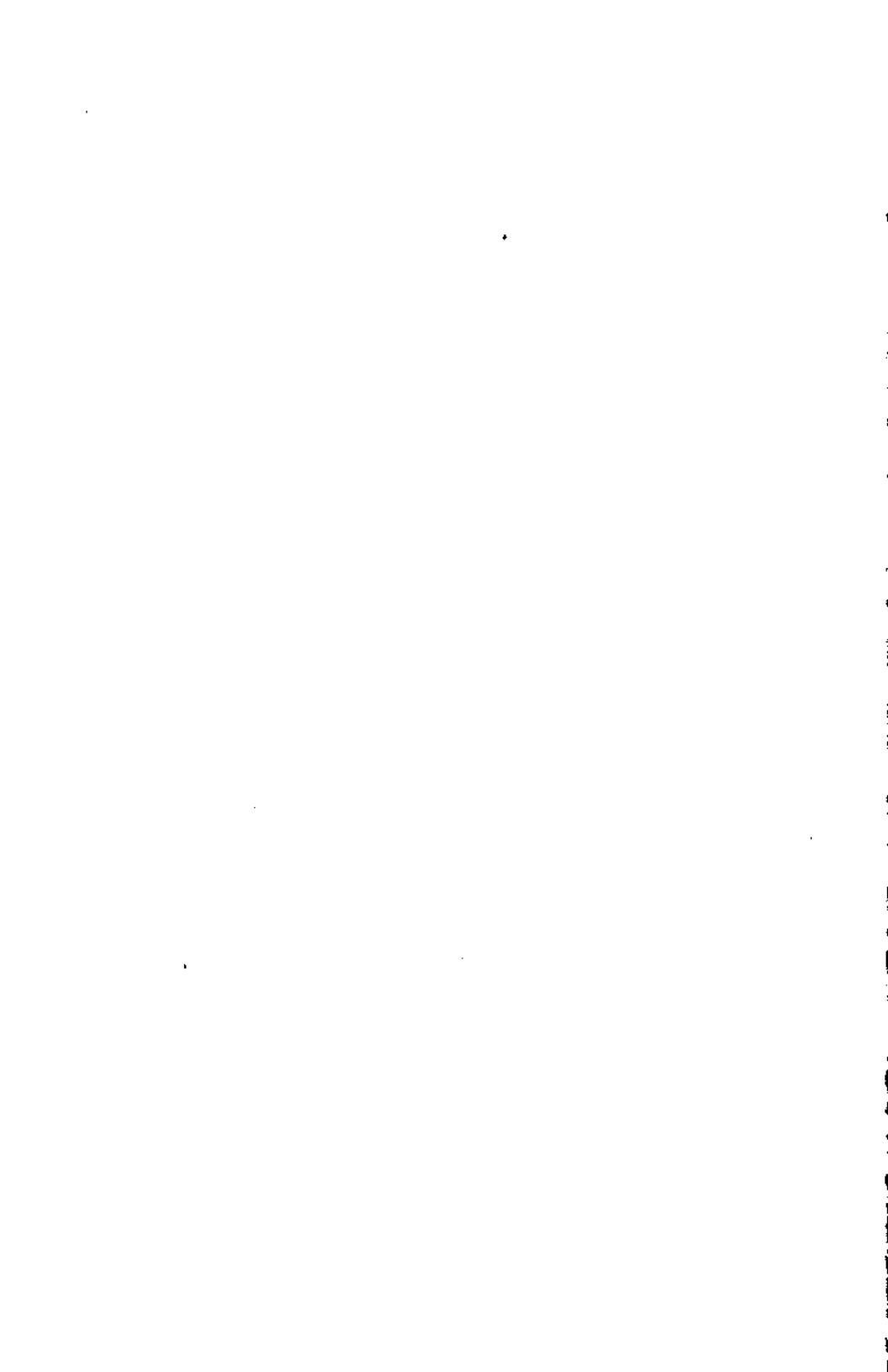
JOHN CHARLES McNEILL

McNeill was a man of unusual physical appearance; his tall, straight figure, his thick iron-gray hair and handsome features made him a marked man in any company. His eyes were remarkable. In his careless moods there was nothing unusual in them; but when his soul was aflame with some inner vision, his eyes glowed with a light that was both beautiful and compelling in its magnetism.

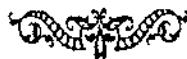
He had the open, free and cordial manner of the gentleman born and reared in the country. He knew little and cared less for social conventions. There was about him that charming unconsciousness of self that one so often sees in the people who live close to and love the genuine things of nature. It is the estimate of all who knew him well that McNeill was one of the most lovable of men. His unselfishness, his freedom from cant and pretension, his love of and joy in life, his perfect candor and his power to love and be interested in the people about him, made him a peerless friend.

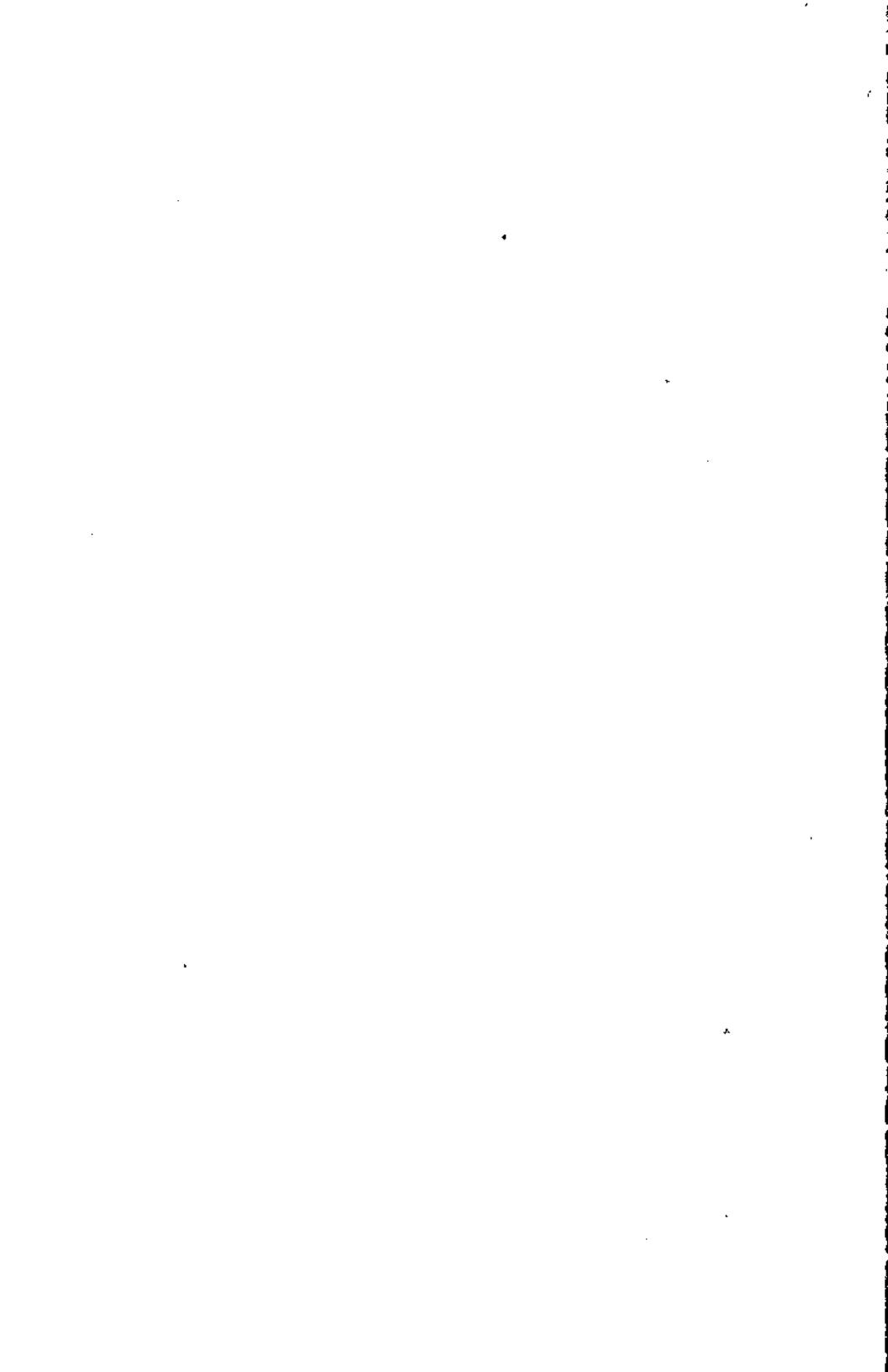
-Editor's note, Lyrics from Cotton Land

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THE POCKET
JOHN CHARLES McNEILL





THE POCKET
JOHN CHARLES McNEILL

Selected Poems
by
John Charles McNeill

Edited by Grace Evelyn Gibson

SCOTTISH
HERITAGE
SERIES



ST.
ANDREWS
PRESS

These poems were first published in *Songs Merry and Sad* (1906), *Lyrics from Cotton Land* (1907), and *Possums and Persimmons* (1977).

Scottish Heritage Series #3

The Pocket John Charles McNeill

*The cover of this book is a reproduction of the
Clan McNeil tartan.*

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An Appreciation: A Uniquely North Carolina Poet

—*By Roy Parker, Jr., distinguished editor of The Fayetteville Times. Parker writes a weekly literary column reviewing the achievements of North Carolina and other writers.*

John Charles McNeill (1874-1907), the ever-young poet the Cape Fear region gave to North Carolina and to romantics of all times, was once described as a "laughing, dulcet voice."

Yet there was always something ineffably sad about this native son of the Lumber River valley, not the least that his life was such a bright star that burned out so swiftly.

McNeill was born in the riverside settlement known as Riverton, a mile or so outside the Scotland County town of Wagram. He was content for all of his short life to draw upon the scenes and the people of that place.

He wrote about Scotch ancestors and about "Lumbee" Indians, and especially about black people, always about black people, about the toil and the simple recreations, about plowing and possum-hunting, about laughter—and about tears.

And this was another side to the sadness.

For McNeill, born into a well-to-do white family, grasped the realities of the painful side of the society of his day. He somehow felt the bitterness and resignation, if not the dull hatred, that black people experienced during that epoch of white supremacy, the Ku Klux Klan, and naked racism.

Perhaps his most unforgettable single poem was the short verse entitled simply and starkly: "Mr. Nigger." In its few lines, McNeill made an undisguised assault—albeit a poetic one—on the white man's inhumanity to black people, and at the same time paid tribute to the blacks' humble yet indispensable contribution to the region that was their native soil as much as his. Even the very title of the poem, conferring the title "Mr." on the race at a time when no individual black person could expect such respect, was a deft twist demonstrating the poet's courageous—for his day—perspective.

McNeill's father, Duncan McNeill, a former newspaper editor and writer, was the poet's role model. Both grandfathers had been native Scotsmen, and the family was steeped in its Scottish heritage.

His boyhood was spent on a farm, and in attendance at the Spring Hill school. He studied also at Whiteville Academy and considered himself a school teacher. He spent a year teaching in a rural school in Georgia. As a mature young man of 21, he entered Wake Forest College in 1894. By then, it seems that McNeill was already an inveterate versifier.

The Wake Forest Student, the literary magazine of the times, published McNeill poems about everything from the food at the college dormitory to his life as a swain among the belles of nearby Raleigh. Later, the files of the journal were found to contain scores of unpublished McNeill poetry.

At Wake Forest, McNeill came under the tutelage, but not the poetic discipline, of Prof. Benjamin Sledd, longtime professor of English and himself a poet. McNeill at one point was listed as assistant to Sledd.

At Wake Forest, McNeill also studied law, and indeed felt himself to be preparing for the legal profession, although Sledd was still pressing him toward a literary career or at least into the teaching of literature. In 1897, he received both a license as a lawyer and an invitation to teach English at Mercer University. First, he got a master's degree from Wake Forest, and then spent a year at Mercer.

In 1900, however, he returned to North Carolina and set up a law practice in Lumberton. Two years later, he formed a partnership with another Scotland County native in Laurinburg, and plunged even deeper into local affairs by being elected to the House of the North Carolina General Assembly.

Yet, McNeill did not prosper as either lawyer or politician. His lack of interest in the routine of the office and the courtroom was also mortgaged to a propensity for drink, for the camaraderie of a storytelling session or a hunting trip.

Only in writing verse, in an astonishing output, did he find personal fulfillment. And his poetry, appearing in popular magazines and in the columns of *The Charlotte Observer*, was instantly popular.

In 1904, the Charlotte newspaper editor invited McNeill to quit his law practice altogether and join the staff of the *Observer*. For three years until his death on October 17, 1907, he turned out literally hundreds of poems, and his name became familiar to a large reading public.

It would be this sort of down-home verse that would make him so popular in his native state. McNeill's poetry about autumn, his passion for describing the smoky crisp days of October, the dear days he called "possum time," were quintessential North Carolina verse.

His own generation, and generations since, have found in these poems a rich and ever-meaningful hymn of praise for a very special time in a place where the winters are often bleakly uninspiring and the summers are often blazing, but where the weeks from harvest to Christmas are the times when "De simmons soon be yaller/ En de blaggum berries blue!" In McNeill's day, they were times for hunting, but much else remains, and so, too, does the appeal of an autumn poem by John Charles McNeill.

There was also another strain in McNeill's poetry, one no less popular. He was prolific in what one biographer called the "high-toned lyric," sweet-singing poems having to do with "Sex," "Be True," and "Stolen Kisses."

A similar sympathy and understanding of the plight of black people, told without preachiness, with a strangely ennobled dignity, but also with the ever-present humor, is in "Chillun."

There are also vivid word pictures, one of an actual place in the Cape Fear Region, the country school where McNeill was a boyhood scholar, an accurate snapshot in verse of what it was like to go to school at "Old Spring Hill."

McNeill's love of his country home and his musical voice, schooled in a Scottish and English literary heritage, and tuned by the voices he heard around him, organize this present selection of his poems. This many-voiced, uniquely North Carolina poet recreates for us in strong images and memorable, nearly lost speech patterns a picture of rural southeastern North Carolina life a century ago, a "long-forgotten story."

This present collection contains examples of McNeill's most enduring verse. The poem entitled "Ligion" illustrates his fine mastery of the intricate dialect form wedded to a typical philosophically humorous theme. McNeill's feel for both the sense of merriment—and the toil—of the rural people of North Carolina is illustrated in the "The Ploughboy at New Year." *

His death at only 33 brought an outpouring of tributes and popular mourning "in a way usually reserved for the passing of a beloved statesman."

The only book of McNeill's verse published during his lifetime, *Songs Merry and Sad*, sold 1,000 copies in a year when it came out in 1906. His writing was so well received that even in manuscript, *Songs Merry and Sad* was awarded the brand-new Patterson Cup, an award established in 1906 to honor writers in and of the state of North Carolina.

And he was hailed at the time as the state's "poet laureate," although that title would not be established formally until 1935. McNeill was buried near his homesite beside the cemetery at Wagram, under a tombstone that actually designates him as the poet laureate.

Within weeks after he died, a second collection entitled *Lyrics From Cotton Land* was published.

Both *Songs* and *Lyrics* would remain in print for more than a half-century, attesting to the enduring popularity of McNeill's perspective and his singing voice.

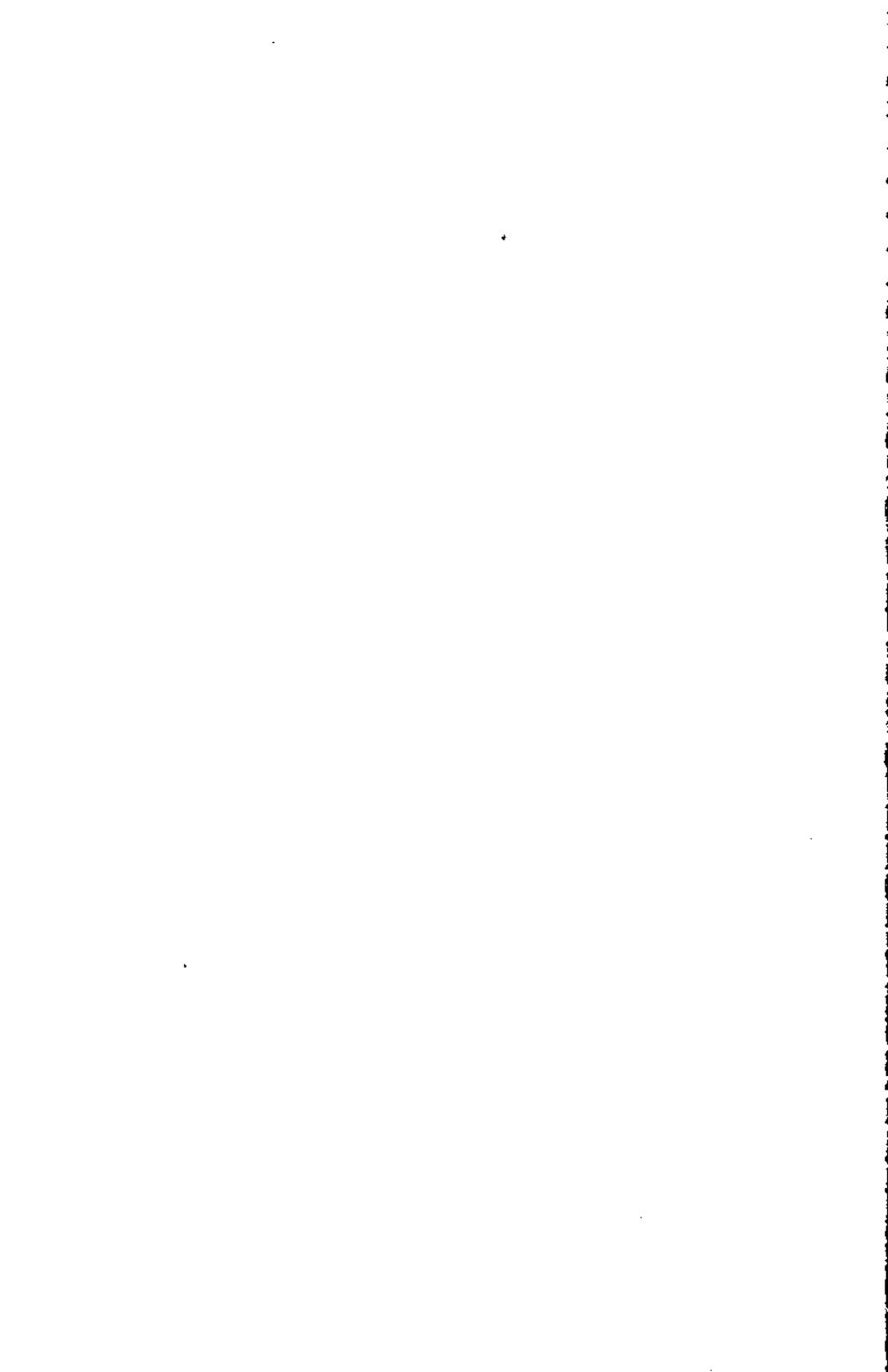
At the time of his death, McNeill was preparing a third collection, to be entitled *Possoms and Persimmons*, containing dialect poems.

Possoms and Persimmons, would have to wait until 1977, when the title was used by an admiring editor, the late Prof. Richard Walser of North Carolina State University, for a collection of 87 previously unpublished McNeill poems in a variety of modes. Walser's headings reflected the astonishing variety of the poet's subject matter. They included "Indians," "Scots," "White Folk," "Black Folk," "Love Songs," "Folklore," and "Moods and Memories."

In his student days at Wake Forest, Prof. Sledd gave McNeill a glimpse of the possibilities for poetry in his native land and in folklore. Sledd himself had written poetry on such North Carolina themes as "Vision of the Milk-White Doe." Sledd, however, was a confirmed classicist. His verse was gilded with the romantic perspectives and classical allusions that were felt obligatory in poetry of the High Victorian age.

McNeill felt no such restraints. His was the verse of dialect and local color. As romantic as any of them, he eschewed classical references and instead fashioned word-pictures of cotton fields, barbecue fires, Scottish cabins, and swee' gum trees turning to flame as the frosts of autumn touched the forests of the Lumber River valley. (He insisted on referring to the river as the "Lumbee," a name later imposed on the native American population of Robeson.)

THE POCKET
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Down Home Songs



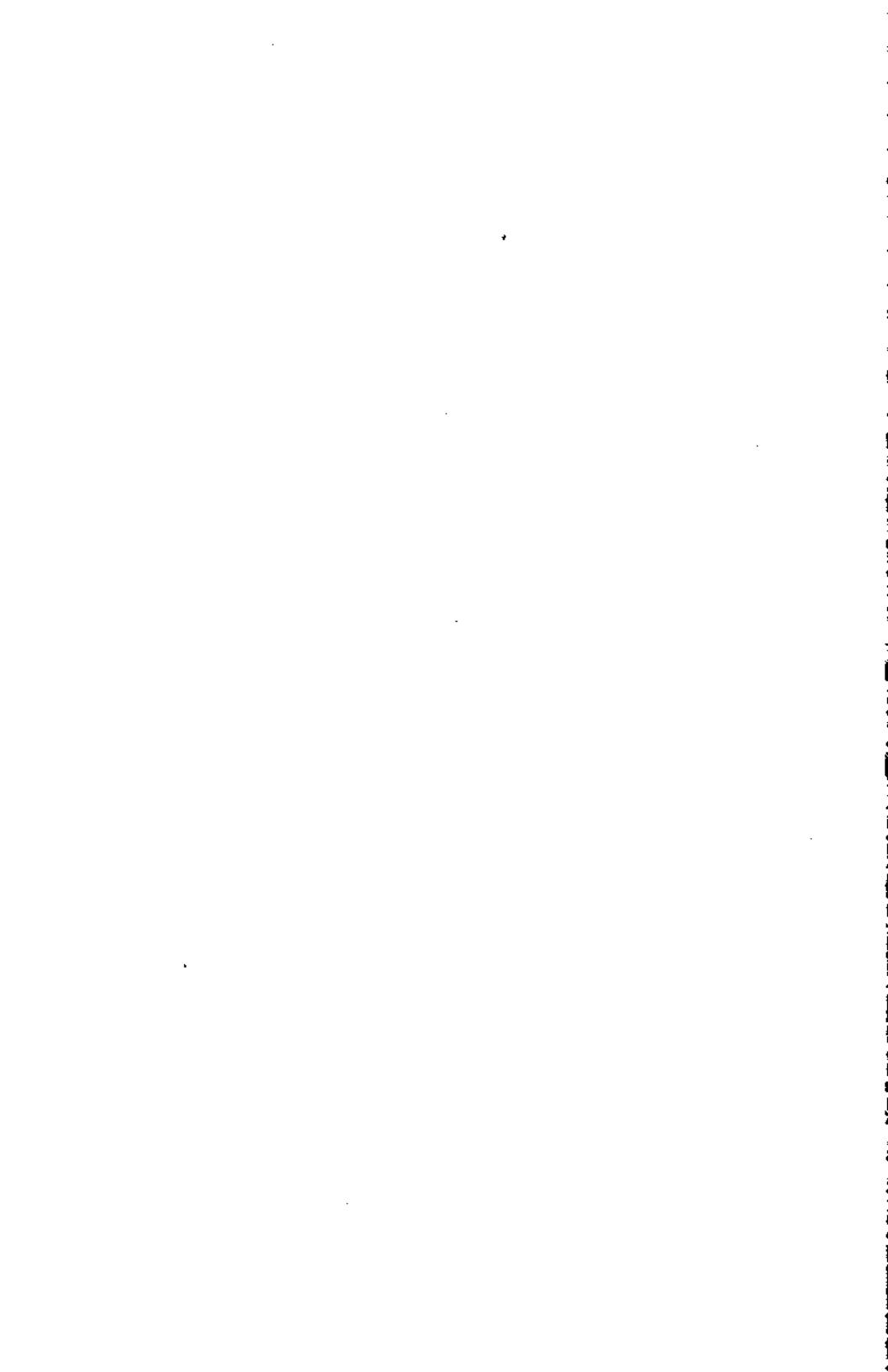
—Dr. Charles Joyner, historian and folklorist, Burroughs distinguished professor of history at the University of South Carolina, Coastal Carolina College and associate of the DuBois Center at Harvard University, has also taught at St. Andrews Presbyterian College, the University of California, Berkeley; the University of Mississippi, and the University of Alabama.

Scotland County, North Carolina, was the place where John Charles McNeill stood, the place that attracted his original notice, from which his earliest awareness and critical powers derived, the source that continued to inform his sensibility, the wellspring of his poetry.

That sense of place was the compass McNeill carried within himself, the compass that enabled him to find the universal in the particular. Just as Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County, in all its particularity, was actually everywhere, so was Scotland County to John Charles McNeill—the experience out of which he wrote, his base of reference, his point of view.

Scotland County focused McNeill's voracious eye into awareness, discernment, order, clarity, insight. The act of focusing, in itself an act of beauty and meaning, turns meditation into poetry. Meaning attaches to McNeill's poems because they are so extremely attentive to place.

Just as place in a poem is more highly selective than any real place, so idea and emotion are less hazy in poetry than in real life., their reality mitigated so that it becomes believable. It is in that sense that John Charles McNeill's poetry may be said to be twice as true as life.



AUTUMN

Heavy with sleep is the old farmstead;
The windfall of orchards is mellow;
The green of the gum tree is shot with red,
The poplar is sprinkled with yellow.
Sluggish the snake and leafy the stream;
The fieldmouse is fat in his burrow;
Sun-up sets millions of dewdrops a-gleam
Where the late grass is grown in the furrow.

Oh, the smell of the fennel is the autumn's own breath,
And the sumac is dyed in her blood;
The char of the locust is what her voice saith,
And the cricket is one with her mood.
Soft are her arms as soft-seeded grass,
The bluebells at dawn are her eyes,
And slow as slow winds are her feet as they pass
Her bees and her butterflies.

And when I grow sick at man's sorrow and crime,
At the pain on pale womanly faces,
At the fever that frets every heart-throb of time,
At all that brings grief or debases,
I thank God the world is as wide as it is,
That 't is sweet still to hope and remember;
That, for him who will seek them, the valleys are his
And the far quiet hills of September.

WHEN I GO HOME

When I go home, green, green will glow the grass,
Whercon the flight of sun and cloud will pass;
 Long lines of wood-ducks through the deepening gloam
Will hold above the west, as wrought on brass,
 And fragrant furrows will have delved the loam,
 When I go home.

When I go home, the dogwood stars will dash
The solemn woods above the bearded ash,
 The yellow-jasmine, whence its vine hath clomb,
Will blaze the valleys with its golden flash,
 And every orchard flaunt its polychrome,
 When I go home.

When I go home and stroll about the farm,
The thicket and the barnyard will be warm.
 Jess will be there, and Nigger Bill, and Tom—
On whom time's chisel works no hint of harm—
 And, oh, 'twill be a day to rest and roam,
 When I go home!

SEPTEMBER

I have not been among the woods,
Nor seen the milk-weeds burst their hoods,

The downy thistle-seeds take wing,
Nor the squirrel at his garnering.

And yet I know that, up to God,
The mute month holds her goldenrod,

That clump and copse, o'errun with vines,
Twinkle with clustered muscadines,

And in deserted churchyard places
Dwarf apples smile with sunburnt faces.

I know how, ere her green is shed,
The dogwood pranks herself with red;

How the pale dawn, chilled through and through,
Comes drenched and draggled with her dew;

How all day long the sunlight seems
As if it lit a land of dreams,

Till evening, with her mist and cloud,
Begins to weave her royal shroud.

If yet, as in old Homer's land,
Gods walk with mortals, hand in hand,

Somewhere to-day, in this sweet weather,
Thinkest thou not they walk together?

AN IDYL

Upon a gnarly, knotty limb
That fought the current's crest,
Where shocks of reeds peeped o'er the brim,
Wild wasps had glued their nest.

And in a sprawling cypress' grot,
Sheltered and safe from flood,
Dirt-daubers each had chosen a spot
To shape his house of mud.

In a warm crevice of the bark
A basking scorpion clung,
With bright blue tail and red-rimmed eyes
And yellow, twinkling tongue.

A lunging trout flashed in the sun,
To do some petty slaughter,
And set the spiders all a-run
On little stilts of water.

Toward noon upon the swamp there stole
A deep, cathedral hush,
Save where, from sun-splotch bough and bole,
Sweet thrush replied to thrush.

An angler came to cast his fly
Beneath a baffling tree.
I smiled, when I had caught his eye,
. And he smiled back at me.

When stretched beside a shady elm
I watched the dozy heat,
Nature was moving in her realm,
For I could hear her feet.

AWAY DOWN HOME

'T will not be long before they hear
The bullbat on the hill,
And in the valley through the dusk
The pastoral whippoorwill.
A few more friendly suns will call
The bluets through the loam
And star the lanes with buttercups
Away down home.

"Knee-deep!" from reedy places
Will sing the river frogs.
The terrapins will sun themselves
On all the jutting logs.
The angler's cautious oar will leave
A trail of drifting foam
Along the shady currents
Away down home.

The mocking-bird will feel again
The glory of his wings,
And wanton through the balmy air
And sunshine while he sings,
With a new cadence in his call,
The glint-wing'd crow will roam
From field to newly-furrowed field
Away down home.

When dogwood blossoms mingle
With the maple's modest red,
And sweet arbutus wakes at last
From out her winter's bed,
'T would not seem strange at all to meet
A dryad or a gnome,
Or Pan or Psyche in the woods
Away down home.

Then come with me, thou weary heart!
Forget thy brooding ills,
Since God has come to walk among
His valleys and his hills!
The mart will never miss thee,
Nor the scholar's dusty tome,
And the Mother waits to bless thee,
Away down home.

HARVEST

Cows in the stall and sheep in the fold;
Clouds in the west, deep crimson and gold;
A heron's far flight to a roost somewhere;
The twitter of killdees keen in the air;
The noise of a wagon that jolts through the gloam
On the last load home.

There are lights in the windows; a blue spire of smoke
Climbs from the grange grove of elm and oak.
The smell of the Earth, where the night pours to her
Its dewy libation, is sweeter than myrrh,
And an incense to Toil is the smell of the loam
On the last load home.

BOB WHITE

He knows the season for gunning,
When the covey slept cuddled at night;
But now, standing lone, in a bold banter tone,
He shouts to the world, "Bob White!"

He thinks it immense, on the post of our fence,
Since the law has defined him as game,
To show himself off and seem reckless enough
To tell the whole farmside his name.

THE FIRST FLOWER

Under the leaves on the south of the hill,
Where the wind and the winter have wasted their will
And the pale grass whispers and blinks in the sun,
The season of seven sweet moons is begun;

The season of seven fair crescents and crowns,
Eric the frost and the autumn's slow fruitage embrowns
The green and the crimson, the gold and the gloom
Of woods where the first flower is waked into bloom.

For the first flower is prophet of all that was dreams,
The dappled lane-shadows, the ripple of streams,
The old hope and love that so lately were young,
And the old song that waits once again to be sung.

Ah, would that the last flower might bloom to fulfill
The pledge of this first on the south of the hill!
And would the last moon might incline to its slope
In memory as sweet as this first is in hope!

BAREFOOTED

The girls all like to see the blucts in the lane
And the saucy johnny-jump-ups in the meadow,
But, we boys, we want to see the dogwood blooms again,
Throwin' a sort of summer-lookin' shadow;
For the very first mild mornin' when the woods are white
(And we need't even ask a soul about it)
We leave our shoes right where we pulled them off at night,
And, barefooted once again, we run and shout it:
You may take the country over—
When the bluebird turns a rover,
And the wind is soft and hazy,
And you feel a little lazy,
And the hunters quit the possums—
It's the time for dogwood blossoms.

We feel so light we wish there were more fences here;
We'd like to jump and jump them, all together!
No sleds for us, no guns, nor even 'simmon beer,
No nothin' but the blossoms and fair weather!
The meadow is a little sticky right at first,
But a few short days 'll wipe away that trouble.
To feel so good and gay, I wouldn't mind the worst
That could be done by any field o'stubble.
O, all the trees are seemin' sappy!
O, all the folks are smilin' happy!
And there's joy in every little bit of room;
But the happiest of them all
At the Shanghai rooster's call
Are we barefoots when the dogwoods burst abloom!

TO MELVIN GARDNER: SUICIDE

A flight of doves, with wanton wings,
Flash white against the sky.
In the leafy copse an oriole sings,
And a robin sings hard by.
Sun and shadow are out on the hills;
The swallow has followed the daffodils;
In leaf and blade, life throbs and thrills
Through the wild, warm heart of May.

To have seen the sun come back, to have seen
Children again at play,
To have heard the thrush where the woods are green
Welcome the new-born day,
To have felt the soft grass cool to the feet,
To have smelt earth's incense, heavenly sweet,
To have shared the laughter along the street,
And, then, to have died in May!

A thousand roses will blossom red,
A thousand hearts be gay,
For the summer lingers just ahead
And June is on her way;
The bee must bestir him to fill his cells,
The moon and the stars will weave new spells
Of love and the music of marriage bells—
And, oh, to be dead in May!

HINTS OF FROST

At dead of night, when crickets keep
 Silent in grassy beds,
When katydids chirp half asleep
 In the oaks of old homesteads,
When folds the bloom her honeyed breast
 To dream of drowsy hums,
Then stealthily, with lance in rest,
 The doughty Jack Frost comes.

At peep of dawn, white stretch his tents
 As far as eye may see;
Pasture and hayrick, field and fence
 Have donned his livery;
And woods ablaze with gold and red
 And every shade between
Are his return for blossoms dead
 And summer's shadowy green.

Bold northern wanderer, let us feel
 The thrill of thy keen breath,
And hear again the ring of steel
 On the river's icy death;
But drive us in at evening glow
 To where the hearth burns red,
And, while outside the cold winds blow,
 Oh, snug us warm in bed.

OLD SPRING HILL

I wonder who the children are
That troop to school these days
Along the old McDuffie path
That winds through woody ways
And leads into the road whereby
The neighbors go to mill.
I wonder who the scholars are
At Old Spring Hill.

I wonder if they play the games
We played when I was there—
Round-town, low-razor, bull-pen, cat,
Base, leap-frog, hounds and hare.
Perhaps the spring is choked with leaves;
Perhaps the church is gone,
With all its shattered panes that told
Of wild balls thrown.

Whoe'er the children are, I know
The same old noise is there:
The droning whisper, afternoons
When chalk-dust fills the air,
The same old fractions multiplied,
The same old cities named;
Mensa, mensae is still declined,
And Spartacus declaimed.

But, oh, the vines of muscadines
That cluster in those woods!
Those ripe persimmons, hanging high,
Loose in their browning hoods;
Those tough dwarf-apples, full of seed,
Are ready now to eat.
And thorns of prickly-pear, though dead,
Are quite alert for feet.

If I should go there now, those brats
Would stare into my face
And whisper who that stranger was
That sauntered round the place.
But, though the tow-heads knew me not,
I could have all my will
Of those dear memoried childhood haunts
At old Spring Hill.

HOME SONGS

The little loves and sorrows are my song;
The leafy lanes and birthsteads of my sires,
Where memory broods by winter's evening fires
O'er oft-told joys, and ghosts of ancient wrong;
The little cares and carols that belong
To home-hearts, and old rustic lutes and lyres,
And spreading acres, where calm-eyed desires
Wake with the dawn, unfevered, fair, and strong;

If words of mine might lull the brain to sleep,
And tell the meaning in a mother's eyes;
Might counsel love, and teach their eyes to weep
Who, o'er their dead, question unanswered skies,
More worth than legions in the dust of strife,
time, looking back at last, should count my life.

SUNBURN'T BOYS

Down on the Lumbee river
Where the eddies ripple cool . . .
Your boat, I know, glides stealthily
About some shady pool.
The summer's heats have lulled asleep
The fish-hawks chattering noise,
And all the swamp lies hushed about
You sunburnt boys.

You see the minnow's waves that rock
The cradled lily leaves.
From a far field some farmer's song,
Singing among his sheaves,
Comes mellow to you where you sit,
Each man with boatman's poise,
There, in the shimmering water lights,
You sunburnt boys.

I know your haunts: each gnarly bole
That guards the waterside,
Each tuft of flags and rushes where
The river reptiles hide,
Each dimpling nook wherein the bass
His eager life employs
Until he dies—the captive of
You sunburnt boys.

You will not—will you?—soon forget
When I was one of you,
Nor love me less that time has borne
My craft to currents new;
Nor shall I ever cease to share
Your hardships and your joys,
Robust, rough-spoken, gentle-hearted
Sunburnt boys!

Heritage~ *Literary & Religious*

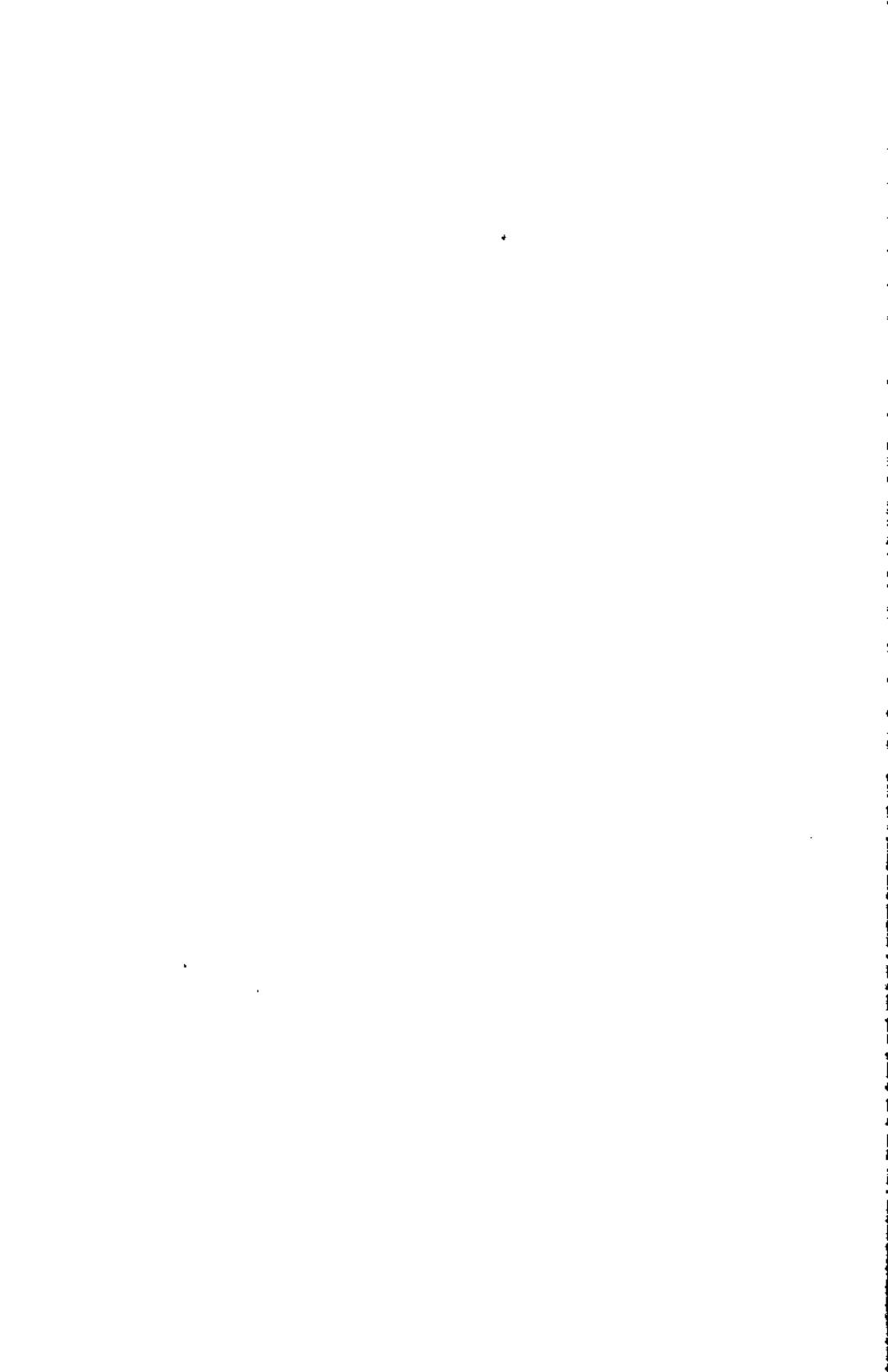


—Dr. Jasper Memory, vice president of the general administration of the University of North Carolina, spends vacations at Riverton, gathering place of the McNeill, Johnson and related Scottish descendants, site of John Charles McNeill's home.

The Scottish heritage of John Charles McNeill was deep: he was born in what is now Scotland County, and both of his grandfathers were born in Scotland. He was, on at least one occasion, photographed in a kilt. His father, Duncan McNeill, was a newspaper editor and a poet in his own right. His mother was descended from Katherine Campbell and the Baptist missionary (from Scotland to the United States) Daniel White. Katherine Campbell, a matriarch in the true Scottish style, was the subject of Gerald Johnson's novel *By Reason of Strength*.

John Charles McNeill's literary heritage arose from several sources. At home, in addition to his father's influence, there was his early exposure to the Richmond Temperance and Literary Society, which, in the latter part of the nineteenth century, nourished the cultural lives of his community. Later, his poetic talents developed in the inspiring atmosphere of Wake Forest College, where he was a student assistant to another poet, Professor Benjamin F. Sledd.

McNeill valued his roots, both ethnic and literary, and in his writings made frequent grateful reference to his family and home.



SONNET

I would that love were subject unto law!
Upon his person I should lay distraint
And force him thus to answer my complaint,
Which I, in well-considered counts, should draw.
Not free to fly, he needs must seek some flaw
To mar my pleading, though his heart were faint;
Declare his counsel to me, and acquaint
Himself with maxim, precedent, and saw.

Ah, I could win him with authorities,
If suing thus in such a sober court;
Could read him many an ancient rhym'd report
Of such sad cases, tears would fill his eyes
And he confess a judgment, or resort
To some well-pleasing terms of compromise!

SUNDOWN

Hills, wrapped in gray, standing along the west;
Clouds, dimly lighted, gathering slowly;
The star of peace at watch above the crest—
Oh, holy, holy, holy!

We know, O Lord, so little what is best;
Wingless, we move so lowly;
But in they calm all-knowledge let us rest—
Oh holy, holy, holy!

SONNET

To-day was but a dead day in my hands.
Hour by hour did nothing more than pass,
Mere idle winds above the faded grass.
And I, as though a captive held in bands,
Who, seeing a pageant, wonders much, but stands
 Apart, saw the sun blaze his course with brass
 And sink into his fabled sea of glass
With glory of farewell to many lands.

Thou knowest, thou who tallest life by days,
 That I have suffered more than pain of toil,
Ah, more than they whose wounds are soothed with oil,
And they who see new light on beaten ways!
The prisoner I, who grasps his iron bars
 And stares out into depth on depth of stars!

REMINISCENCE

We sang old love-songs on the way
In sad and merry snatches,
Your fingers o'er the strings astray
Strumming the random catches.

And ever, as the skiff plied on
Among the trailing willows,
Trekking the darker deeps to shun
The gleaming sandy shallows,

It seemed that we had, ages gone,
In some far summer weather,
When this same faery moonlight shone,
Sung these same songs together.

And every grassy cape we passed,
And every reedy island,
Even the bank'd cloud in the west
That loomed a sombre highland;

And you, with dewmist on your hair,
Crowned with a wreath of lilies,
Laughing like Lalage the fair
And tender-eyed like Phyllis:

I know not if 't were here at home,
By some old wizard's orders,
Or long ago in Crete or Rome
Or fair Provencal borders,

But now, as when a faint flame breaks
From out its smouldering embers,
My heart stirs in its sleep, and wakes,
And yet but half-remembers

That you and I some other time
Moved through this dream of glory,
Like lovers in an ancient rhyme,
A long-forgotten story.

AN EASTER HYMN

The Sun has come again and fed
 The lily's lamp with light,
And raised from dust a rose, rich red,
 And a little star-flower, white;
He also guards the Pleiades
 And holds his planets true:
But we—we know not which of these
 The easier task to do.

But, since from heaven he stoops to breathe
 A flower to balmy air,
Surely our lives are not beneath
 The kindness of his care;
And, as he guides the blade that gropes
 Up from the barren sod,
So, from the ashes of our hopes,
 Will beauty grow toward God.

Whate'er thy name, O Soul of Life,—
 We know but that thou art,—
Thou seest, through all our waste of strife,
 One groping human heart,
Weary of words and broken sight,
 But moved with deep accord
To worship where thy lilies light
 The altar of its Lord.

A CHRISTMAS HYMN

Near where the shepherds watched by night
And heard the angels o'er them,
The wise men saw the starry light
Stand still at last before them.
No armored castle there to ward
His precious life from danger,
But, wrapped in common cloth, our Lord
Lay in a lowly manger.
No booming bells proclaimed his birth,
No armies marshalled by,
No iron thunders shook the earth,
No rockets climb the sky;
The temples builded in his name
Were shapeless granite then,
And all the choirs that sang his fame
Were later breeds of men.
But, while the world about him slept,
Nor cared that he was born,
One gentle face above him kept
Its mother watch till morn;
And, if his baby eyes could tell
What grace and glory were,
No roar of gun, no boom of bell
Were worth the look of her.
Now praise to God that ere his grace
Was scorned and he reviled
He looked into his mother's face,
A little helpless child;
And praise to God that ere men strove
About his tomb in war
One loved him with a mother's love,
Nor knew a creed therfor.

OCTOBER

The thought of old, dear things is in thine eyes,
O, month of memories!

Musing on days thine heart hath sorrow of,
Old joy, dead hope, dear love,

I see thee stand where all thy sisters meet
To cast down at thy feet
The garnered largess of the fruitful year,
And on thy check a tear.

Thy glory flames in every blade and leaf
To blind the eyes of grief;
Thy vineyards and thine orchards bend with fruit
That sorrow may be mute;

A hectic splendor lights thy days to sleep,
Ere the gray dusk may creep
Sober and sad along thy dusty ways,
Like a lone nun, who prays;

High and faint-heard thy passing migrant calls;
Thy lazy lizard sprawls
On his gray stone, and many slow winds creep
About thy hedge, asleep;

The sun swings farther toward his love, the south,
To kiss her glowing mouth;
And Death, who steals among thy purpling bowers,
Is deeply hid in flowers.

'Would that thy streams were Lethc, and might flow
Where lotus blossoms blow,
And all the sweets wherewith thy riches bless
Might hold no bitterness!

Would, in thy beauty, we might all forget
Dead days and old regret,
And through thy realm might fare us forth to roam,
Having no thought for home!

And yet I feel, beneath thy queen's attire,
Woven of blood and fire,
Beneath the golden glory of thy charm
Thy mother heart beats warm,

And if, mayhap, a wandering child of thee,
Weary of land and sea,
Should turn him homeward from his dreamer's quest
To sob upon thy breast,

Thine arm would fold him tenderly, to prove
How thine eyes brimmed with love,
And thy dear hand, with all a mother's care,
Would rest upon his hair.

ODESSA*

A horror of great darkness over them,
No cloud of fire to guide and cover them,
Beasts for the shambles, tremulous with dread,
They crouch on alien soil among their dead.

"Thy shield and thy exceeding great reward,"
This was thine ancient covenant, O Lord,
Which, scaled with mirth, these many thousand years
Is black with blood and blotted out with tears.

Have these not toiled through Egypt's burning sun,
And wept beside the streams of Babylon,
Led from thy wilderness of hill and glen
Into a wider wilderness of men?

Life bore them ever less of gain than loss,
Before and since Golgotha's piteous Cross,
And surely, now, their sorrow hath sufficed
For all the hate that grew from love of Christ!

Thou great God-heart, heed thou thy people's cry,
Bare-browed and empty-handed where they die,
Sca-sundered from wall-girt Jerusalem,
There being no sword that wills to succor them,—

And Miriam's song, long hushed, will rise to thee,
And all thy people lift their eyes to thee,
When, for the darkness' horror over them,
Thou comest, a cloud of light to cover them.

* *Massacre of Jews in October, 1905.*

PROTEST

Oh, I am weary, weary, weary
 Of Pan and oaten quills
And little songs that, from the dictionary,
 Learn lore of streams and hills,
Of studied laughter, mocking what is merry,
 And calculated thrills!

Are we grown old and past the time of singing?
 Is ardor quenched in art
Till art is but a formal figure, bringing
 A moncy-measured heart,
Procrustean cut, and, with old echoes, ringing
 Its bells about the mart?

The race moves on, and leaves no wildernesses
 Where rugged voices cry;
It reads its prayer, and with set phrase it blesses
 The souls of men who die,
And step by even step its rank progresses,
 An army marshalled by.

If it be better so, that Babel noisces,
 Losing all course and ken,
And grief that wails and gladness that rejoices
 Should never wake again
To shock a world of modulated voices
 And mediocre men,

Then he is blest who wears the painted feather
 And may not turn about
To dusks when muses romped the dewy heather
 In unrestricted rout
And dawns when, if the stars had sung together,
 The sons of God would shout!

"IF I COULD GLIMPSE HIM"

When in the Scorpion circles low
The sun with fainter, dreamier light,
And at a far-off hint of snow
The giddy swallows take to flight,
And droning insects sadly know
That cooler falls the autumn night;

When airs breathe drowsily and sweet,
Charming the woods to colors gay,
And distant pastures send the bleat
Of hungry lambs at break of day,
Old Hermes' wings grow on my feet,
And, good-by, home! I'm called away!

There on the hills should I behold,
Sitting upon an old gray stone
That humps its back up through the mold,
And piping in a monotone,
Pan, as he sat in days of old,
My joy would bid surprise begone!

Dear Pan! 'Tis he that calls me out;
He, lying in some hazel copse,
Where lazily he turns about
And munches each nut as it drops,
Well pleased to see me swamped in doubt
At sound of his much-changing stops.

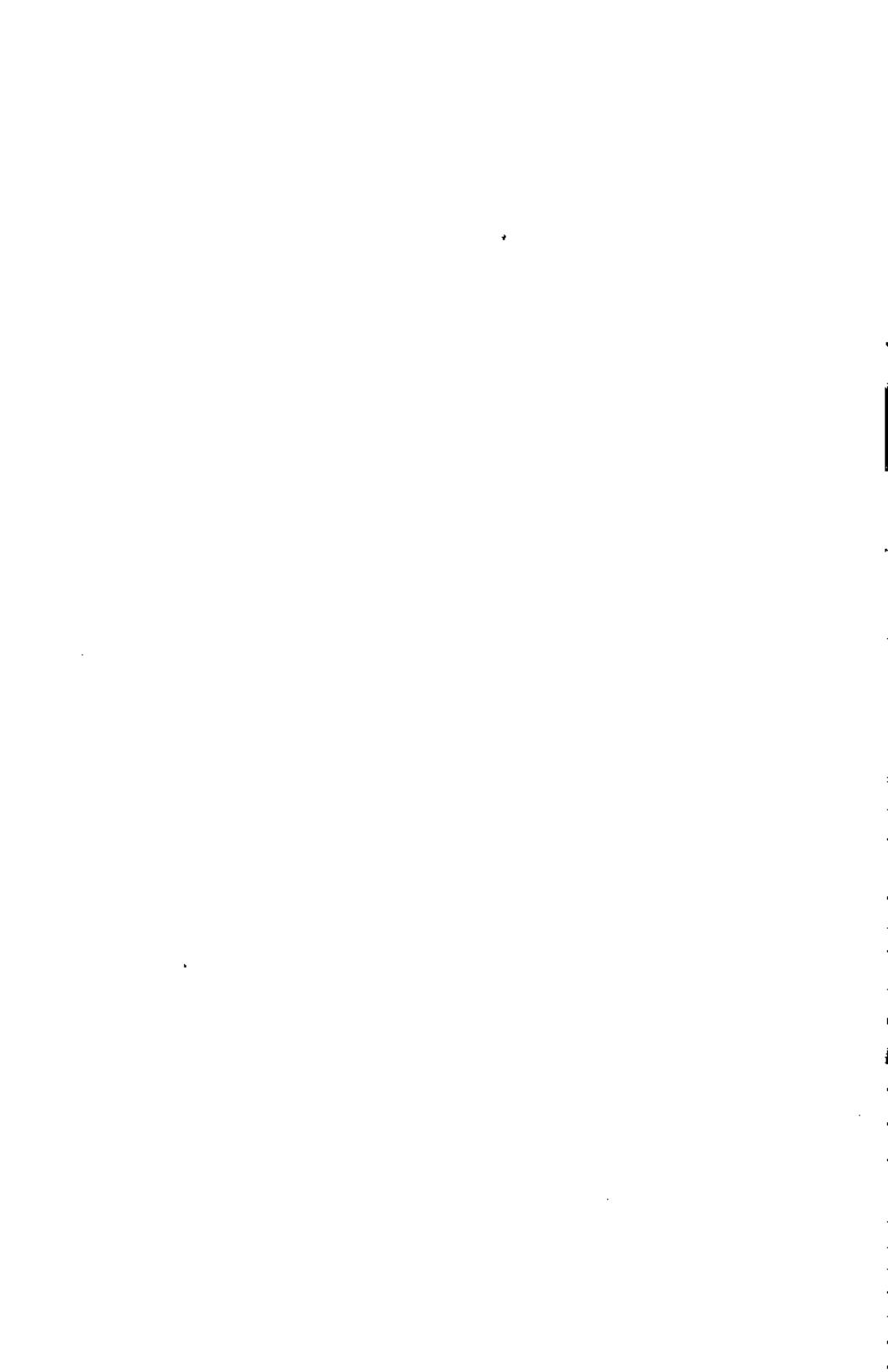
If I could glimpse him by the vine
Where purple fox-grapes hang their store,
I'd tell him, in his leafy shrine,
How poets say he lives no more.
He'd laugh, and pluck a muscadine,
and fall to piping, as of yore!

DESPONDENCY

Good-by, sweet dreams, and let me be content!
With Ariel sounds lured on, I am forspent,
And eagle hopes that never give me wings.
Time was when fame's far, placeless whisperings
Made hot my heart, to leave it in despair;
But now is all my passion changed to prayer.

And Heine wept for words, when worn with years
And crowned with every leaf a lyrist wears,
And master Shakespeare grieved that passions pressed
Upon his heart that could not be expressed:
As when with death old Moses hand-in-hand
Stood gazing at the far-off promised land.

Then trixy Ariel, if the lords of speech
Wept that thy music wandered from their reach,
I pray thee that no more thy soft airs come
To haunt his ears who listens and is dumb.
Above all graves alike the stars are sent:
Leave me, sweet dreams, and let me be content!



Heritage-Scottish



—*Mrs. Mary Lou Huske is the historian of the
Clan MacNeil Association of America*

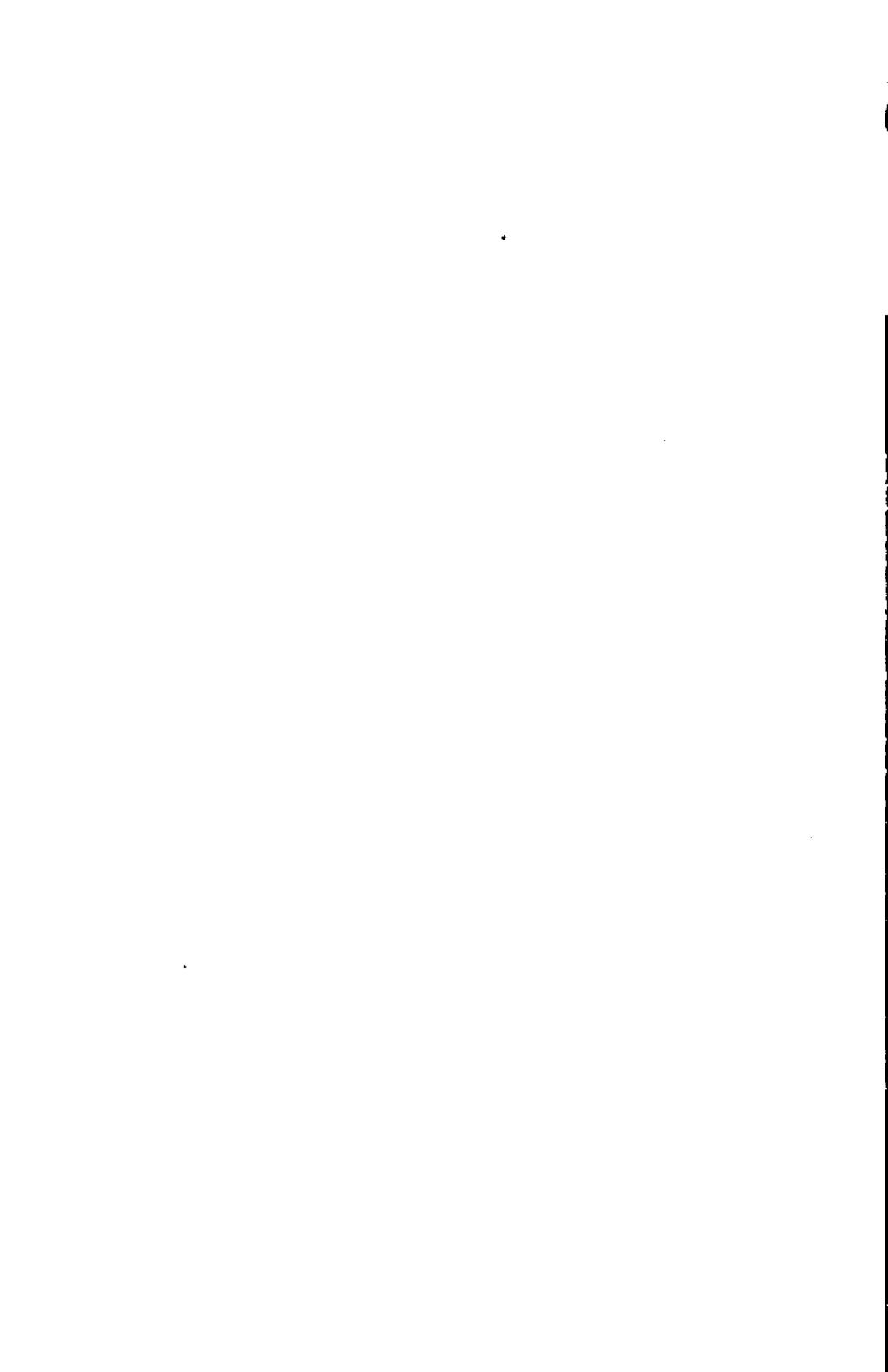
To identify with the poet John Charles McNeill as "one o' our ain" in the clan MacNeil is to feel the kinship as much in spirit as in name. Being of Argyll stock he had an ancient heritage in his soul, evidenced more recently in a headline as the "Robert Burns of North Carolina."

In the old country even today, the native Scottish spirit is quite different on the east coast from that prevailing in the Highlands and islands of the west. To compare the romantic idealism of the west with the practical frugality of the east would be as futile as comparing the garb of the lily with that of a hickory nut. They just grow that way!

The more adventuresome in the west were seafaring folk not only from island to island, but far abroad. Being in tune with nature was a matter of life and death. This romantic spirit expresses a love of enlarging ordinary boundaries. Whether he pushes forward around the world or whether in imagination beyond a limited environment of a few miles, such as the boyhood adventures of a lad by the banks of the Lumber River, the western Scot enjoys this vast kindred spirit.

During the time of the settling of America, the Scots came to the Carolinas by shiploads, again many in boats of their own, making more than one trip as they traveled with other kith and kin by the thousands to the wilderness of the Cape Fear valley. These western Scots left their homeland longing for a home that never was. Being at home in a foreign land, however, consisted as much in belonging to one another in spirit as in sinking individual anchors deeply into hearth and homestead.

While they exchanged their Clan territorial lands, their common Gaelic tongue, their Highland tartans, they kept with great tenacity their Scriptures and their faith in God.



ON THE CAPE FEAR

Prince Charlie an' I, we war chased owre the sea
Wi' naething but conscience for glory.
An' here I drew sawrd, when the land wad be free,
An' was whipped tae a hole as a Tory.

When the Bonny Blue Flag was flung tae the breeze,
I girded mysel' tae defend it;
They warstled me down tae my hands an' my knees
An' flogged my auld backbane tae bend it.

Sae the deil wan the fights, an' wrang hauds the ground,
But God an' mysel' winna bide it.
I hae strength in my airm yet for many a round
An' purpose in plenty tae guide it.

I been banished an' whipped an' warstled an' flogged
(I belang tae the Democrat party),
But in gaein' owre quagmires I hae na been bogged
An' am still on my legs, hale an' hearty!

THE COUNSELOR

My bairnies, touch no barleycarn,
For drinkin' makes an empty barn.
(They winna see me if I slip
Tae the big chist an' tak a sip.)

My ain bairns, never, never fight:
The Book says brawlin' isna right.
(I hope they'll heed these gude words rather
Than imitate their deere auld father.)

Whan ye hae siller, dinna lend,
But hauld 't, baith frae faw an' friend.
(Ach! I had walth tae busk me bonny
Had I na gien awa' my money.)

Whan ye wad wed, hear na love's singin',
But mind what gear the wench is bringin'.
(My ain wife, Maggie, smiles at this,
For she had naething but a kiss.)

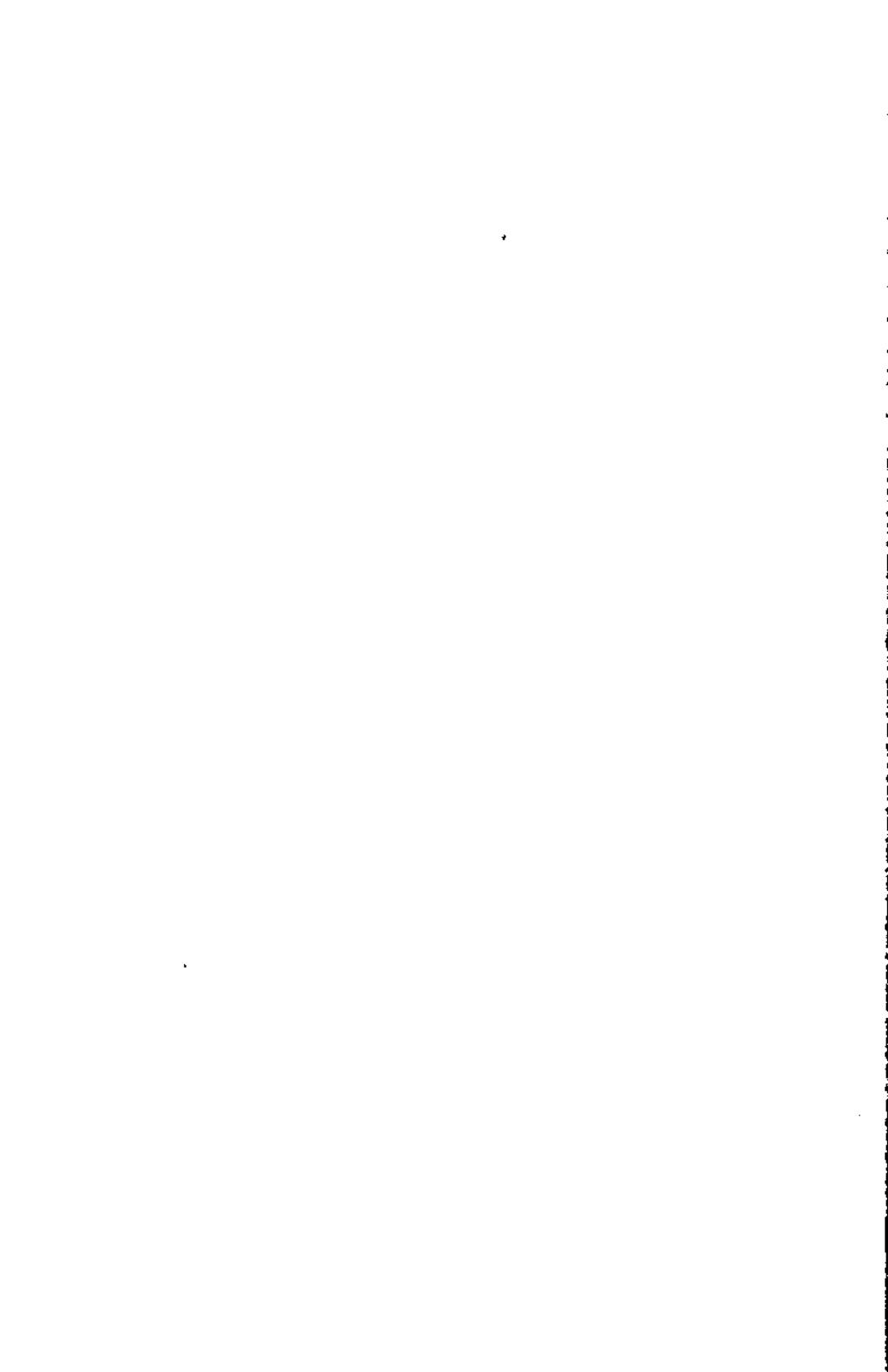
ISEUIT FORSAKEN

Oh, where hae ye been, ye bonny, bonny lass,
An' where hae ye been the day?
There be dust on your feet an' wildwood grass:
Ye hae been in mony a wildwood pass
An' on mony a dusty way.

*I hae come frae the wood where my love and I,
Where we gaed an' cared na whither,
An' his laughin' was love, an' his love was a sign,
He was kind tae me then, when saft was the sky.
When we gaed in the wood thegither.*

But the simmer birdies hae lang since flown,
An' the wood is hoarse an' hollow;
The blossoms that blew an' the light that shone
An' the laughin' an' love an' the lover hae gone
Wi' the gowdfinch an' mavis an' swallow.

*He swaur, wi' his een fu' tender then,
He wadna, wadna leave me.
How fausely he swaur ye kinna ken,
But I wad in my heart he were come again,
Wan mair time tae deceive me!*

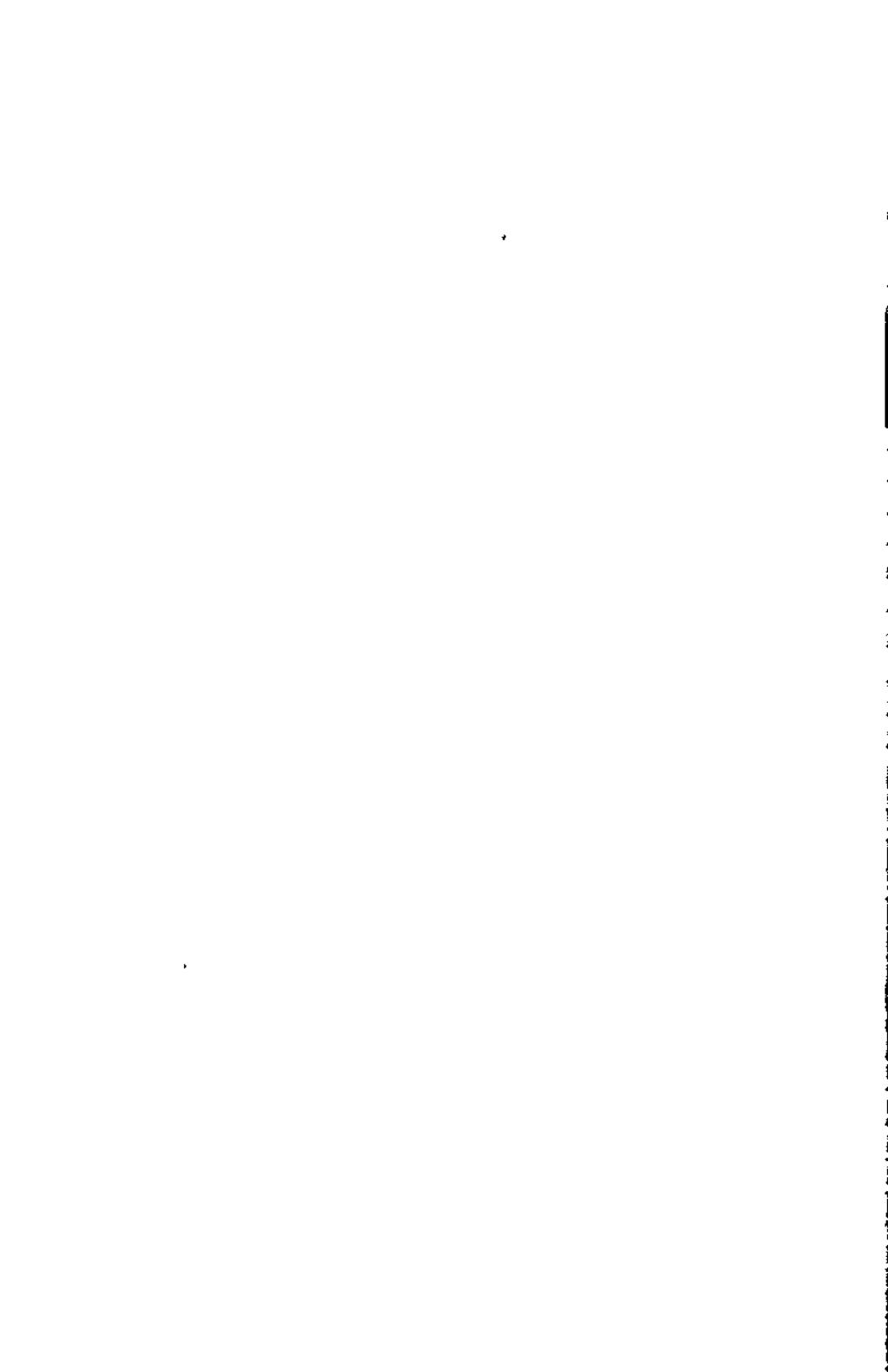


Voices



Judge J. Dickson Phillips, U.S. 4th Circuit Court of Appeals, grew up in Laurinburg, Scotland County, where he learned to know and love John McNeill's poetry.

John Charles McNeill's poetry—particularly his wonderfully true dialect poems—magically evoke the goodness and beauty, the pathos and poignancy, that underlay the harshness of the times and society of the post-Reconstructed, impoverished rural South. His special gift was the ability to sense and to capture with matchless fidelity the speech and the scenes and the innermost longings that reflected the kinder and gentler soul of that society, and the special beauty of the rural countryside that he obviously knew and loved so well. For those of us who can remember and who share his love for the people and the time and the place, his poems are a priceless legacy.



White Voices

PARTICIPIALLY SPEAKING

I taken a dose to cure my cold,
I shaken the bottle hard.
This I done as I been told
By the prescription card.

The doctor written the card for me—
For when I sent, he come.
So I shaken and taken in a glass,
Not much of it, but some.

Yet Sue she bawled, and thunk I drunk
Poison; and Maud begun
To howl, as if I knowed not what—
A grown man—I done done!

AMBITION

I ain't decided what I'll be.
It's sortie hard to tell.
Sometimes I think I'll go to sea
An' try the sea a spell.
Sometimes I think 'll take an' try
My chances on the lan'.
But any how I aim to be
A mighty turble man.

No; Susie would n' kiss me
When we played the game o pawn.
An' Billy laughed at my bow legs
An' ast to try 'em on.
An' Jim sayed I was sunburnt
Jis' like a Croatan.
They'll hate this when I git to be
A mighty turble man.

They'll come into my palace.
I'll be dressed up in silk.
They'll say, We're pore an' hungry, sir,
An' want some buttermilk.
I'll give 'em wine an' honey,
An' then I'll rise an' stan'
An' say, 'T was me you th'owed off on—
A mighty turble man!

They'll whimper then, you bet they will,
An' wish that they was dead.
An' when they git down on their knees,
Lak kneelin' at yore bed,
An' beg me not to kill 'em, then
I'll ketch 'em by the han'
An' say, Don't ever laugh no more
At a sunburnt, bow-leg man!

BOYS' VISIONS

S'pose I could fly!

I bet you I would brag.

Fer not a gal in school could take my tag.

I'd keep my wings hid till they 'mos' got there

'N'nen I'd sail up, laughin', in the air,

Danglin' my heels a leetle out o' reach,

An' toss 'em back a biscuit er a peach!

If I could fly,

I wouldn't go to school,

Ner go to mill a-straddle of no mule.

I'd jis' sail out an' see what I could fin',

Fer ever'thing I saw, you know, 'd be mine.

Bloodhoun's an', 'tectives jis' s well go die.

I wouldnt make no tracks, if I could fly.

If I could fly,

I'd do like Robin Hood,

An' rob the other robbers in the wood.

I'd run frum them a little ways, right slow,

An'nen I'd say, "Bye, bye," an' up I'd go

With all the diamonds what the robbers had.

My! but don't you know 't u'd make 'em mad!

If I could fly,

I'd build a house o' stone,

An'nen I'd need a wife, when I got grown.

I'd ast the king to lemme have his gal,

Callin' 'im to 'is face ol' pard an' pal,

An' when he wouldn't, I'd jis' say, "That's tough,"

An' pick the princess up an' tote her off.

If I could fly,
I'd buy 'em things at home,
A new stove an' a skillet an' a broom,
A fine horse with a ribbin on his tail,
'N' nen I'd gittum a new milkin' pail.
I bet I'd make 'em think an' study some.
Ma'd say, "Where—do—these—things—come—frum?"

THE PLOUGHBOY AT NEW YEAR

Chris'mas is yur off now:
Plant an' plough an' gether.
Peg the traces, bolt the plough,
Hle the hamestring leather.

Chris'mas ain't so turble strong.
It gits by too soon.
All that whole week ain't as long
As one day in June.

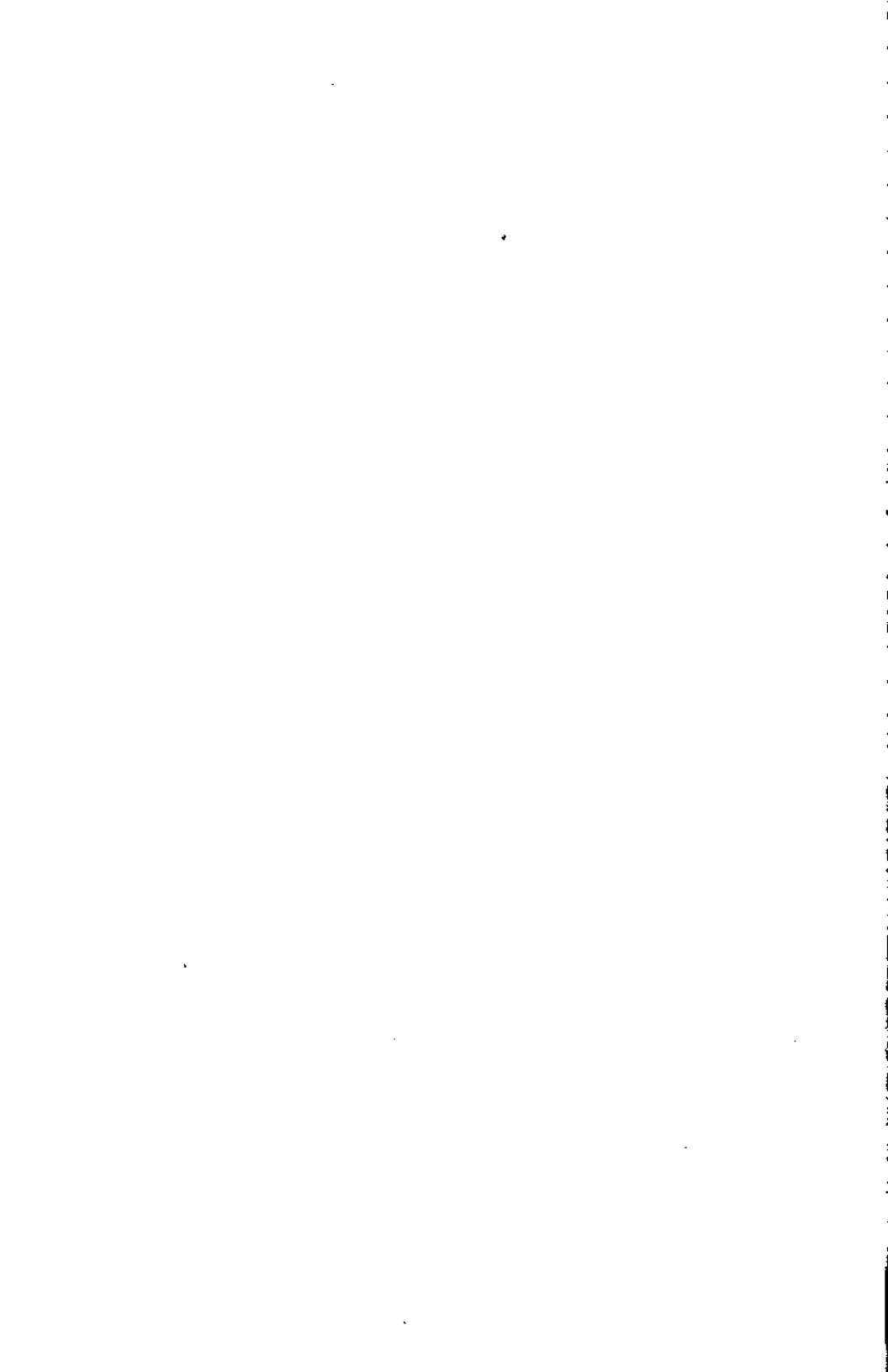
Workin', wishin' week by week,
Countin' days, and then
Pop yore crackers, eat yore cake
An' gear yore mule again.

HOLDING OFF THE CALF

They all 'll tell you I wouldn't mind
A-holdin' the kef at all
If it didn't come at the very time
I hear the other boys call.
Jis' when I see 'em a-goin' by
Wi' their dogs an' guns in a hurry,
An' I want to go, I hear maw cry
'At she's ready to milk ol' Cherry!
An' there I stan' wi' the kef by the yur,
The boys done out o' sight,
An' maw a-whang, a-whang, jis' like
She aimed to take all night.

'Bout sundown 's time for the swimmin'-hole,
But from me it's mighty fur:
That's jis' the minute each blessed day
I must ketch the kef by the yur.
The parson, my bud—he's a preacher, you know,
But he can't git nowhere to preach—
Looks on wi' 's thumbs in 'is gallus straps,
Smilin' sweet as a peach.
The kef is a fool, don't mean no harm,
Only wantin' to suck;
But sometimes I git so awful mad
I twistics his yur like a shuck.

They all say I'm lazy, no count in the worl',
Only to raise a row;
But I woun't mind workin' all times o' day
'Cep' the time for milkin' the cow.
Whenever the fellers go off to swim,
Along wi' their dogs an' gun,
That pore white kef, a-wantin' his share,
Heads off both ends o' my fun.
But some sweet day I'll be a man,
An' when I'm boss myse'f,
I'll ketch ever' boy 'at stays on the place
An' put him to holdin' a kef!

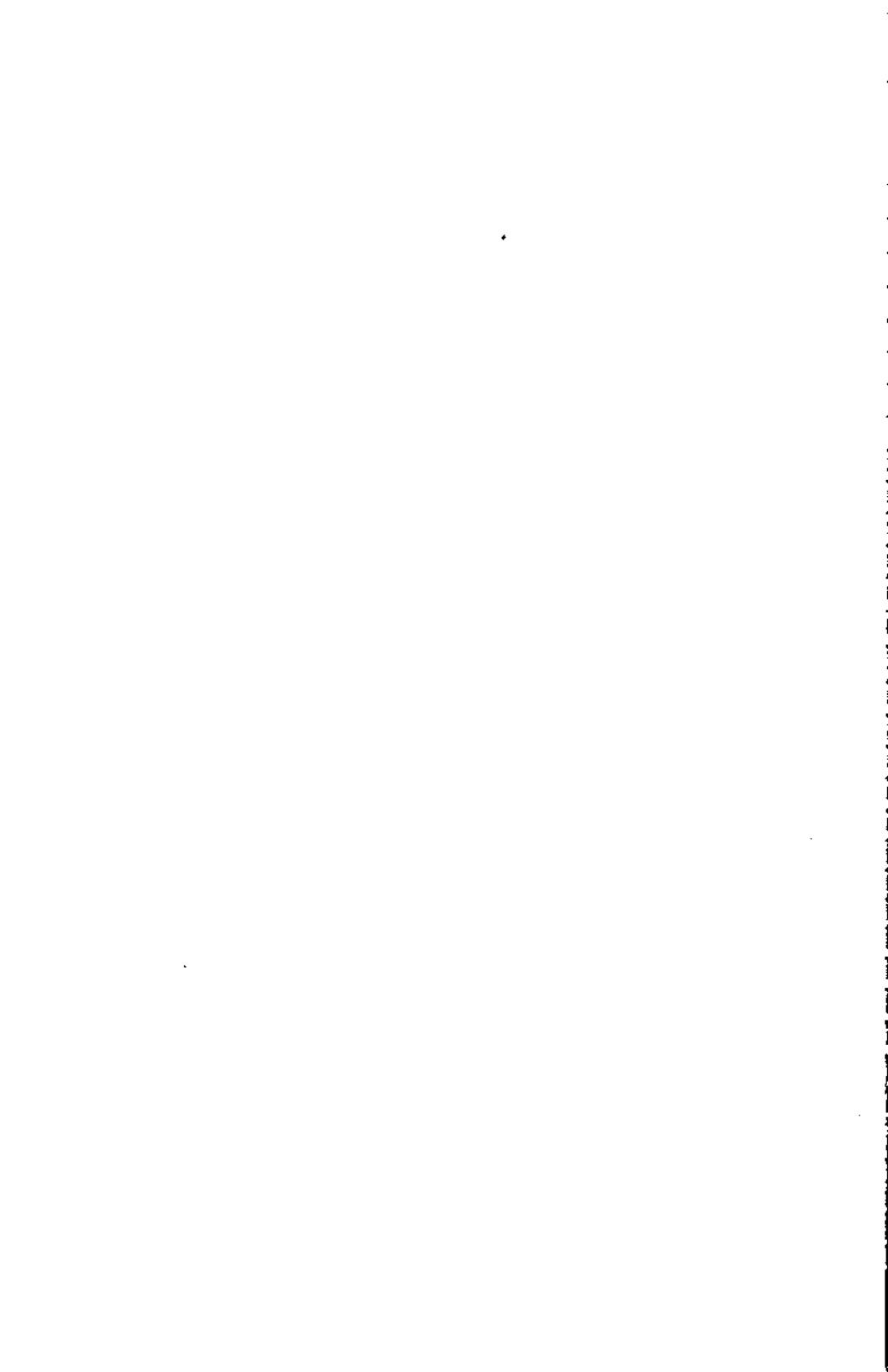


Indians



—Dr. Robert W. Reising, professor, department of communicative arts, Pembroke State University, teaches John Charles McNeill in his classes on Southern writers.

Nowhere in the writings of John Charles McNeill is his genius more visible than in "Indians," the three poems he creates through and in the voices of the Croatan (now the Lumbee) Indians themselves. The trio of short pieces communicate in "eye dialect," a version of written English that visually seizes a version of spoken English. What McNeill orthographically records is what he, like those around him in Southeastern North Carolina at the turn of the century, heard from a unique group, as distinctive in speech as they were in mindset. It is his artistry in capturing that speech and that mindset, each reciprocally shaping each other, that allows McNeill's poetry to fascinate the human eye—and to penetrate the human heart.



QUATRAIN

Mon, I'd a danjus, danjus han',
A turble danjus Croatan.
En Chrizmuz bein' de time to fide,
I'd hunt'n' de bullics all day 'n all nide.

CROATAN PHILOSOPHY

I seds in my yard when de sun goes down
An' I wadches he toad frawgs hobbin' aroun';
Den I smokes my pipe an' kicks my cur
An' I wonders whud a toad frawg is fer.

I hyurs de skeeter hawk raddle his wings,
But dur's plenty er skeeters lef to sing.
An' de skeeters desscves, I don' know whur
De skeeters comes fum ner whud dec is fer.

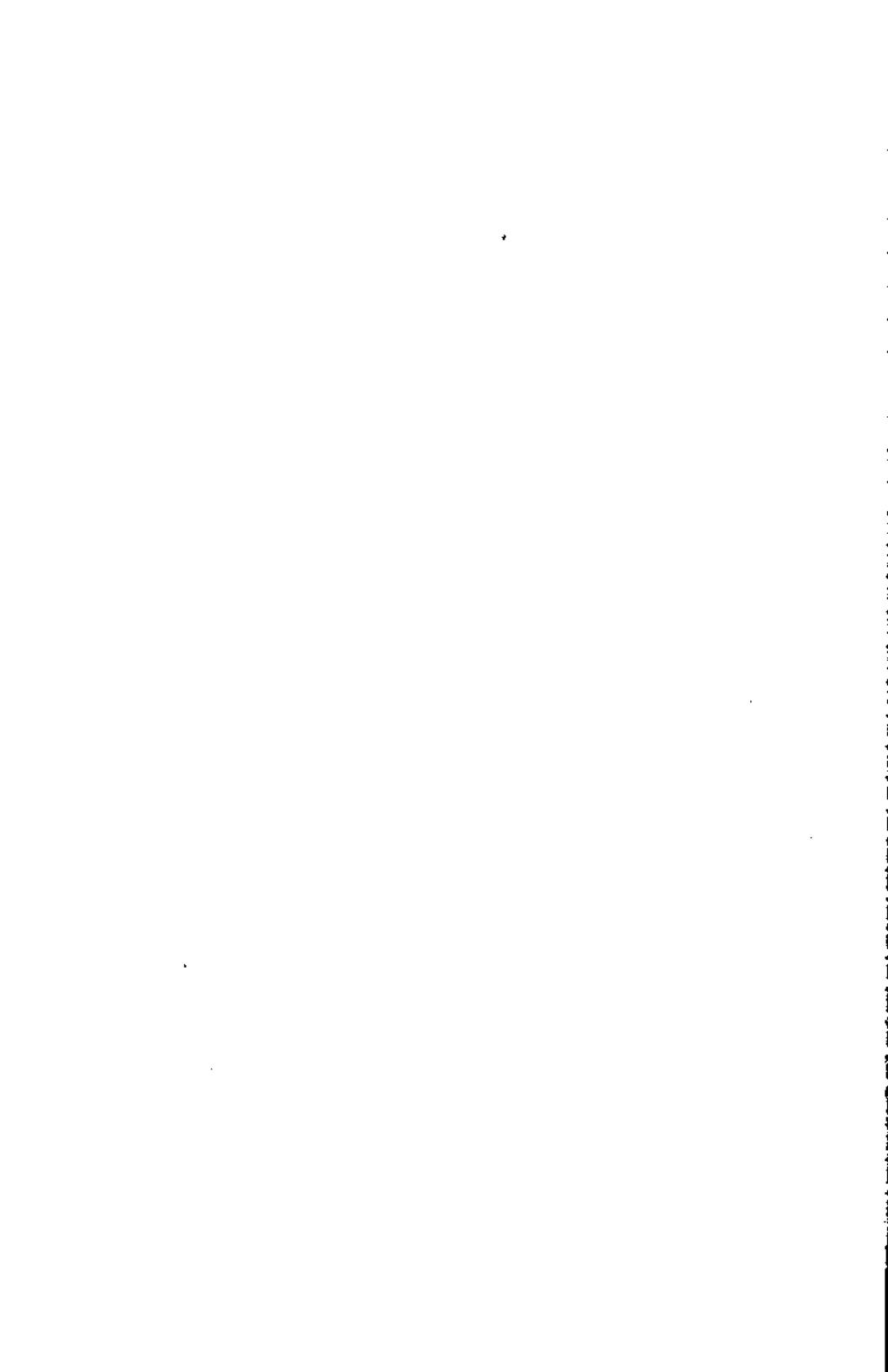
Hid 'pears to me, above an' abound,
Dad de skeeters an' frawgs is er-crowd'n' me oud.
Hid takes all my time to slap an' to stomp,
An' I thing I'll hadder move ouder de swamp.

IN ROBESON COUNTY

A grade big time we's gwine a-sec,
Wen de negs courd come, my gal en me.

We's gwine a-sed on a whide mon's sead,
My gal she'll fetg li'l supp'n' to ead.

While de lawyers l' pleadin' we'll ead our snag,
En wen nide fall, we'll moze on bag.



Black Voices

A PROTEST

De cawn is drapped en civered
Per de crow to grabble out.
De shoat he fin's de 'tater bed
Befo' dey 'gins to sprout.

De hen hatch out her chickens
Whilst de hawk bees lookin' on,
En 'fo' de cherries ripens good
De birds is got 'em gone.

Dey all steals fum de nigger man,
But if de nigger steals
Dey putts him on de chaingang
Wid a weight behin' his heels.

WISHING

I wisht I wus a hummin' bird.
I'd nes' in a willer tree.
Den noth'n" but supp'n' wut goes on wings
Could ever git to me.

I wisht I wus a snake. I'd crawl
Down in a deep stump hole.
Noth'n' 'ud venture down in dar,
Into de dark en col'.

But jis' a nigger in his shack,
Wid de farlight in de chinks—
Supp'n' kin see him ever' time
He even so much as winks.

It's a natchel fac' dat many a time
I wisht I wus supp'n' wil';
A coon or a' owl or a possum or crow—
Leas'ways, a little while.

I'd lak to sleep in a holler gum
Or roost in a long-leaf pine,
Whar nothin' 'ud come to mess wid me
Or ax me whar I's gwine.

SPRINGTIME

O catfish in de eddy,
When de moon is in de full!
O watermillion ready
'Mong' yo' dewy leaves, to pull!
O choofies, sugar-rooted!
Us women en us men
Is all done back bar'footed,
'Ca'se de springtime's come again.

De bullbat 'gins to beller
Across de shimmery hill.
"I ain't long befo' a feller
Kin hear de whuppoorwill.
De hawk sets roun' en watches
De biddies wid de hen,
Er-scratchin' in de doodle dust,
'Ca'se springtime's come again.

Dirt-daubers soon be squealin',
Shapin' up deir mud,
En a sort er sleepy feelin'
'Ll git gwine along yo' blood,
Till you lose yo' holt, en dozes,
En jerks, en wakes up—den
De fus' thin dat you knows is
Dat de springtime's come again.

'LIGION

De Augus' meetin' 's over now.
We 's all done been baptize',
Me en Ham en Hick'ry Jim
En Joc's big Lize.

Oh, 'ligion is a cu'i's thing
In its workin' amongs' men!
We'll hatter wait a whole yur now
'Fo' bein' baptize' again!

A TAR HEEL

Oh, I gits my stren'th fum white-side meat,
I sops all de sorghum a nigger kin eat,
I chaws wheat bread on Saddy night,
En Sunday's when my jug gits light.

I kin cut mo' boxes 'n a shorter while,
Den any 'er coon fer forty mile';
I kin dip mo'tar en scrape mo' scrape
En leave my crap in better shape,

En chip en pull en corner finer,
Den any 'er coon in No'th Killiner.
When it comes to bein' a turk'ntime han',
Count Loftin fer a full-size' man.

'POSSUM TIME AGAIN

Oh, dip some 'taters down in grease
En fling de dogs a 'tater apiece.
Ram yo' brogans clean er tacks,
Split de splinters en fetch de ax.
It's 'possum time again!

Catfish tender, catfish tough,
We's done et catfish long enough.
We's tar'd er collards en white-side meat,
En we's gwine have supp'n' wut's good to eat.
It's 'possum time again!

De pot's gwine simmer en blubber en bile
Till it gits scummed over wid 'possum ile.
But le' s don't brag till we gits de goods.
Whoop! Come along, boys! We's off to de woods.
It's 'possum time again!

THE RED SHIRTS*

I laks red watermillions wut 's juices' when dey 's red,
I laks red hankshers, washin' days, aroun' my ooman's head,
I laks to shuck de red yur, en red lemonade goes good,
De Lawd he sot gre't sto' by red in fillin' me wid blood;
But when I sees a red shirt, folks, right den is when I hushes
En reaches up en gits my hat en totes it to de bushes.

En dat's de way it allus is: de coon he travels roun'
En gits a drink to he'p 'im up, but de drink it th'ows 'im down;
He gits a wife to do de work about his little fahm,
But she's so triflin' in her ways she natchly doos him hahm;
En 'ca'se de nigger laks red things—even red ile in his lamp—
De white man gits a red shirt fer to make him quit de camp.

* Disfranchisement in North Carolina, 1898.

SUBSTITUTES

We ain't gwine have no turkey
Less'n we kiss him wil',
But we'll have a pot er cooter soup
Scum' over wid cooter ile.

We ain't gwine have no poun' cake
When dat Chris'mas dinner come,
But 'll eat dat cracklin' bread all up
En hunt anudder crumb.

We mought not have no liquor
To make us dance aroun',
But 'simmon beer goes purty good
Atter it settles down.

In case we don't have powder,
We won't give up our fun:
We'll slam a plank ag'in' de groun'
Loud as a Chris'mas gun.

We all won't go er-huntin'.
We'll save our shot en caps,
En 'pen' fer all de birds we gits
Upon our peckridge traps.

We got no hoss to travel wid,
But we got a kyart en bull,
En dat's enough, Gord bless yo' soul
Fer all we haves to pull.

Oh, folks is fools to cry en cuss,
'Ca'se deir ves' ain't red en blue!
If you ain't got de spohtin' goods,
De homespun goods 'll do.

THE SIESTA

I tells 'em to please
Bile a dinner er peasc
En set me a table out under de trees,
Den lemme be fed
Wid a pone er corn bread
En ingerns; den lemme lay down a bed.

Oh, de skeeter kin sting
En de dirt-dauber sing,
De housefly kin tickle my yur wid 'is whing;
De chillun kin bawl,
De cuckroach kin crawl
Up my britches, en ganders en peafowls kin squall;

Oh, the dishes kin break
En de shettters kin shake
But all kin er fusses can't keep me awake,
'Ca'se it takes more 'n dese
T' on settle my ease
When I's et a good dinner er corn-pone en peas.

DEW

I gits my chillun up 'fo' day,
'Ca'se de dew it makes de cotton weigh.
I feeds 'em on a chanc er peas,
I ties de pads upon deir knees,
En 'fo' de day break here we goes,
Draggin' our sacks betwix' de rows.
Dem udder niggers do' know why
My cotton tetch de scales so high.
Dar's supp'n' wrong dey speck; dey know
Deir famblies gethered row fer row.
But I jis' squints en spits—key-chew!
Is I gwine tell 'em 'bout de dew?

CHRIS'MAS COMIN'

Oh, flail de peas en beat de rice
En shuck de nubbin cawn;
Collar en block de bench-laig fice,
Else maybe he'll be gone;
Keep gwine until yo' wuk is done;
Whoop! yas, keep things er-hummin'.
Hit soon be time to load yo' gun,
'Ca'se Chris'mas is er-comin'!

Oh, dig a hole un'nearth de flo'
En putt de taters in;
Chune up de fiddle en de bow,
En souple-up yo' shin;
En, whe'r we's clappin' wid our han's,
Er wid our heels er-drummin',
We's gwine a rattle all de pans,
'Ca'se Chris'mas is er-comin'!

THE MULE

I don't lak to plow no hoss;
I laks to plow a mule.
De mule he bees jis' wut he bees,
En he know dat he's a fool.

One yur I plowed a little bull,
De next I plowed a steer.
De grass, de crab-grass et me up
On bofe craps, purty near.

De hoss gut too much sperits,
De steer een't gut enough,
De bull wa'n't made fer plowin':
But de mule—Law, he's de stuff!

CHILLUN

Fo'teen chillun's all we got;
Yit I loves a chile fer sho',
En I do' know why de Lawd can't give
Us jis' 'bout fo'teen mo'.

Den dee could chop de cotton,
En run aroun' de cawn
En I'd jis' have de easis' time
I had since I been bawn.

PUNISHMENT

I laks to go to coht en sce
Dem lawyers scrappin' all fer me.
Dat big jedge, wid de preacher look,
Readin' in dat-ar yaller book,
Dem twelve big juries, listenin' close
To how I broke ol' Davy's nose,
En all dese people wut you sce,
Dey's all in here beca'se er me.

If I gits out, de gals is mine;
Dey laks a man kin cut a shine.
If I gits in, dey'll feed me free,
En keep me warm, en let me be
As fat en lazy as I kin.
I kinder hope dey'll putt me in.

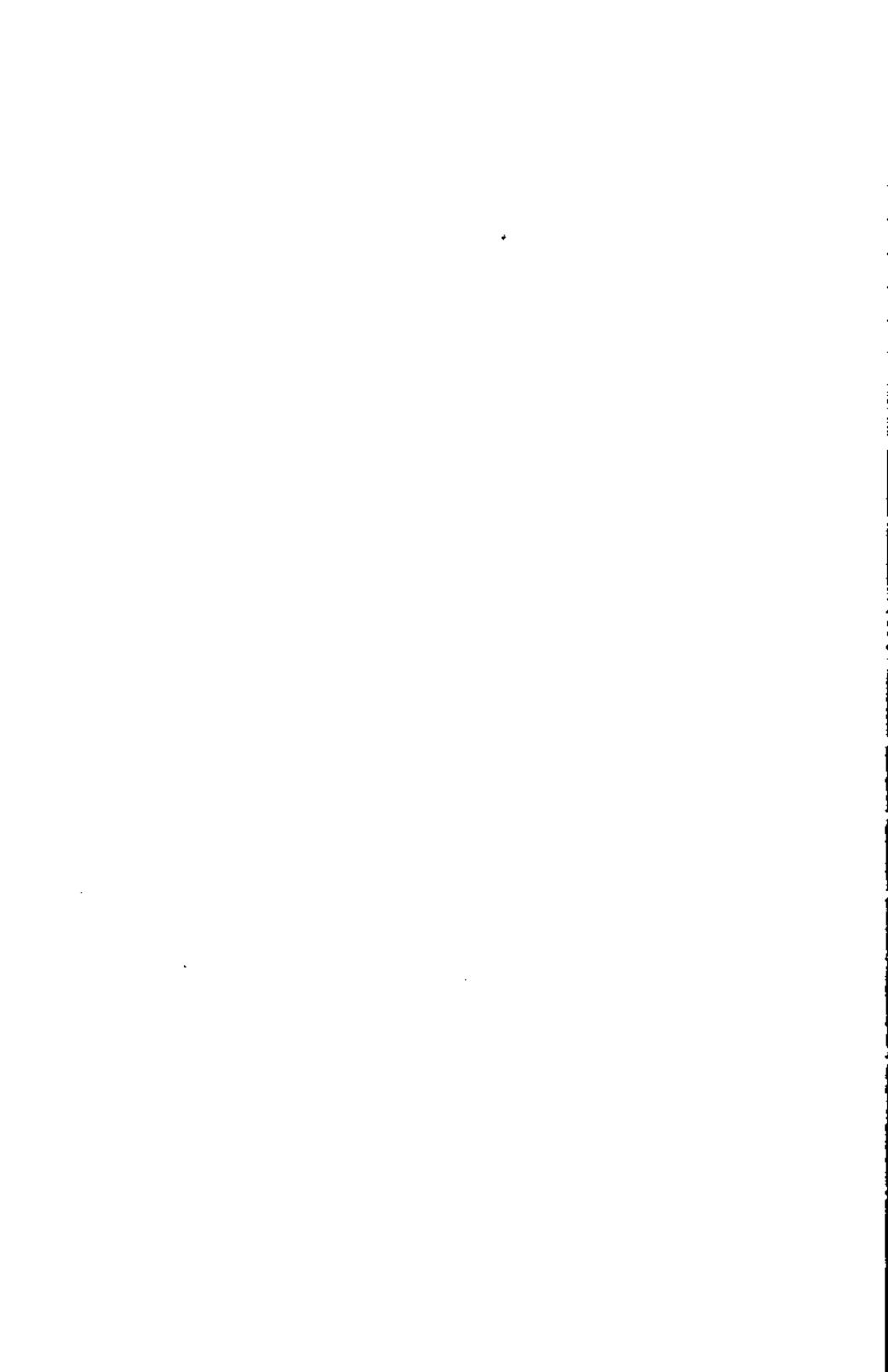
'POSSUM TIME

De 'simmons soon be yaller,
En de blaggum berries blue: .
Does you need to ax a feller
Wut 'e 's gwine a-do?

"I AIN'T LONG

Tie a new cracker
Upon de ol' lash;
Roll up de log heaps
En burn all de trash;
Scooter de newgroun',
Dreen out de pon';
Bone off fer cotton
En bed up fer cawn.

'T ain't long 'fo' drappin'
De sced in de groun';
'T ain't long 'fo' choppin'
En sidin' aroun';
'T ain't long 'fo' tassels
En blooms gits in prime;
Un-uh! it ain't long
'Fo' layin'-by time!



L'Envoi



"97" THE FAST MAIL

Where the rails converge to the station yard
She stands one moment, breathing hard.

And then, with a snort and a clang of steel,
She settles her strength to the stubborn wheel,

And out, through the tracks that lead astray,
Cautiously, slowly she picks her way,

And gathers her muscle and guards her nerve,
When she swings her nose to the westward curve,

And takes the grade, which slopes to the sky,
With a bound of speed and a conquering cry.

The hazy horizon is all she sees,
Nor cares for the meadows, stirred with bees,

Nor the long, straight stretches of silent land,
Nor the ploughman, that shades his eye with his hand.

Nor the cots and hamlets that know no more
Than a shriek and a flash and a flying roar;

But, bearing her tidings, she trembles and throbs,
And laughs in her throat, and quivers and sobs;

And the fire in her heart is a red core of heat,
That drives like a passion through forest and street,

Till she sees the ships in their harbor at rest,
And sniffs at the trail to the end of her quest.

If I were the driver who handles her reins,
Up hill and down hill and over the plains,

To watch the slow mountains give back in the west,
To know the new reaches that wait every crest,

To hold, when she swerves, with a confident clutch,
And feel how she shivers and springs to the touch,

With the snow on her back and the sun in her face,
And nothing but time as a quarry to chase,

I should grip hard my teeth, and look where she led,
And brace myself stooping, and give her her head,

And urge her, and soothe her, and serve all her need,
And exult in the thunder and thrill of her speed.

IN A CANOE

The curious current wanders wide
Its guardian swamps from side to side
And mirrors dimly in its tide
 The leafless arch,
Through which, with herald trumpet, stride
 The winds of March.

When, 'twixt-whiles, they forego their stress,
There falls a vasty loneliness,
Such as some city might impress
 On pilgrim hearts,
Where a gray hush holds in duress
 Deserted marts.

Then, lo, a feathery tinge of green
About yon willow, faintly seen;
And, where those gnarly maples lean,
 Lo, lightly spread,
Spring's gossamer, a woven sheen
 Of passionate red!

And yonder, those bare limbs among,
Red as the rose that blooms ere long,
The cardinal sits, his bird-heart strong
 With joy refound,
Himself a blaze of light, his song
 A blaze of sound.

Now, when the winds once more take wing,
The great trees shout and groan and swing
The reedy brakes go whispering
 Of seasons fair,
And in my heart the thrill of spring
 Where dead thoughts were,

Till wind and rippling stream and bird
Sing to my pulse in monochord,
And all their song is one wild word:
 “New! new!”—
New hope, fresh purpose, dreams new stirred,
 And skies all blue!

MR. NIGGER

How could we do without you,
Mr. Nigger?
Could we not talk about you,
Mr. Nigger,
We'd have to quit our politics,
"T would put our papers in a fix,
We'd have to start and learn new tricks,
Mr. Nigger.

Ah, ragtime would be sadly misst,
Mr. Nigger!
There'd be no elocutionist,
Mr. Nigger.
The coon-song's flow would then be checked.
The minstrel show would soon be wrecked
And writers of your dialect,
Mr. Nigger.

I cannot see, if you were dead,
Mr. Nigger,
How orators could earn their bread,
Mr. Nigger;
For they could never hold the crowd
Save they abused you long and loud
As being a dark and threatening cloud,
Mr. Nigger.

But plough my land and barn my crop,
Mr. Nigger.
I'll furnish sorghum for your sop,
Mr. Nigger.
And see you earn your moneys worth,
Else, when dull times possess the earth,
I'll burn you to excite the North,
Mr. Nigger.

You're a vast problem to our hand,
 Mr. Nigger.

Your fame is gone throughout the land,
 Mr. Nigger.

The heart of all this mighty nation
Is set to work our your salvation,
But don't you fear expatriation,
 Mr. Nigger.

L'ENVOI

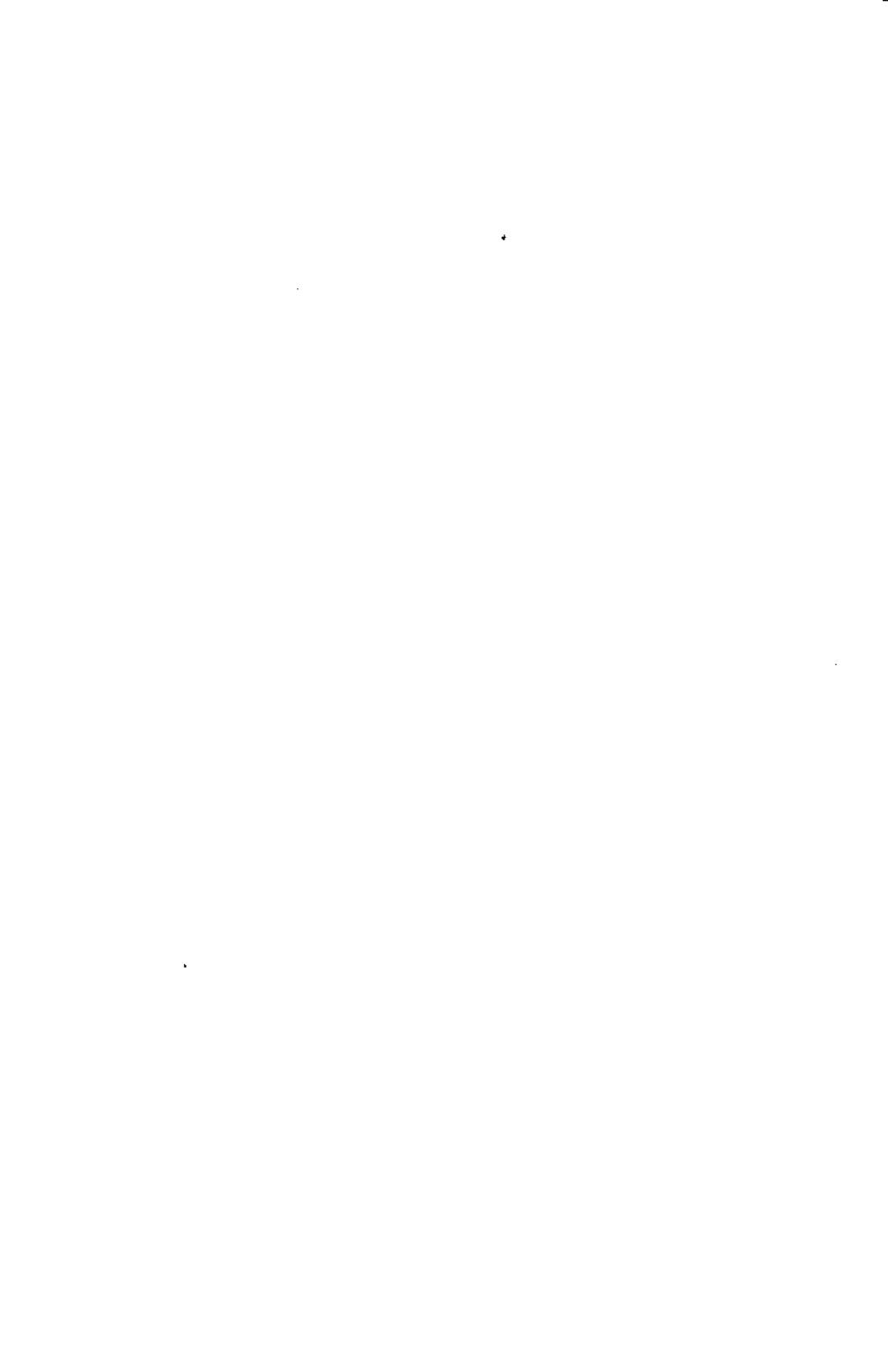
God willed, who never needed speech,
 "Let all things be;"
And, lo, the starry firmament
 And land and sea
And his first thought of life that lives
 In you and me.

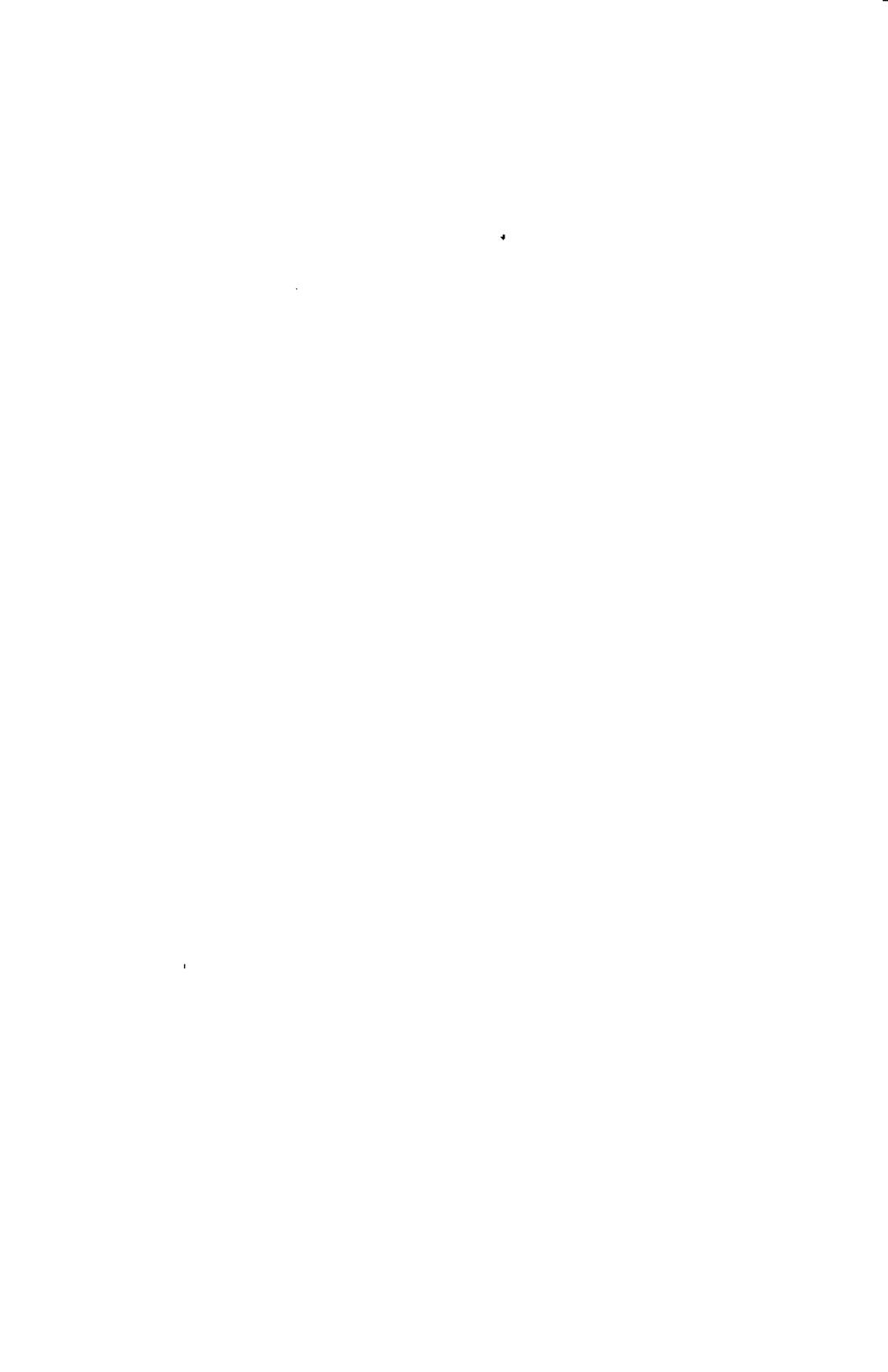
His circle of eternity
 We see in part;
Our spirits are his breath, our hearts
 Beat from his heart;
Hence we have played as little gods
 And called it art.

Lacking his power, we shared his dream
 Of perfect things;
Between the tents of hope and sweet
 Rememberings
Have sat in ashes, but our souls
 Went forth on wings.

Where life fell short of some desire
 In you and me,
Feeling for beauty which our eyes
 Could never see,
Behold, from out the void we willed
 That it should be,

. And sometimes dreamed our lisping songs
 Of human hood
Might voice his silent harmony
 Of waste and wood,
And he, beholding his and ours,
 Might find it good.





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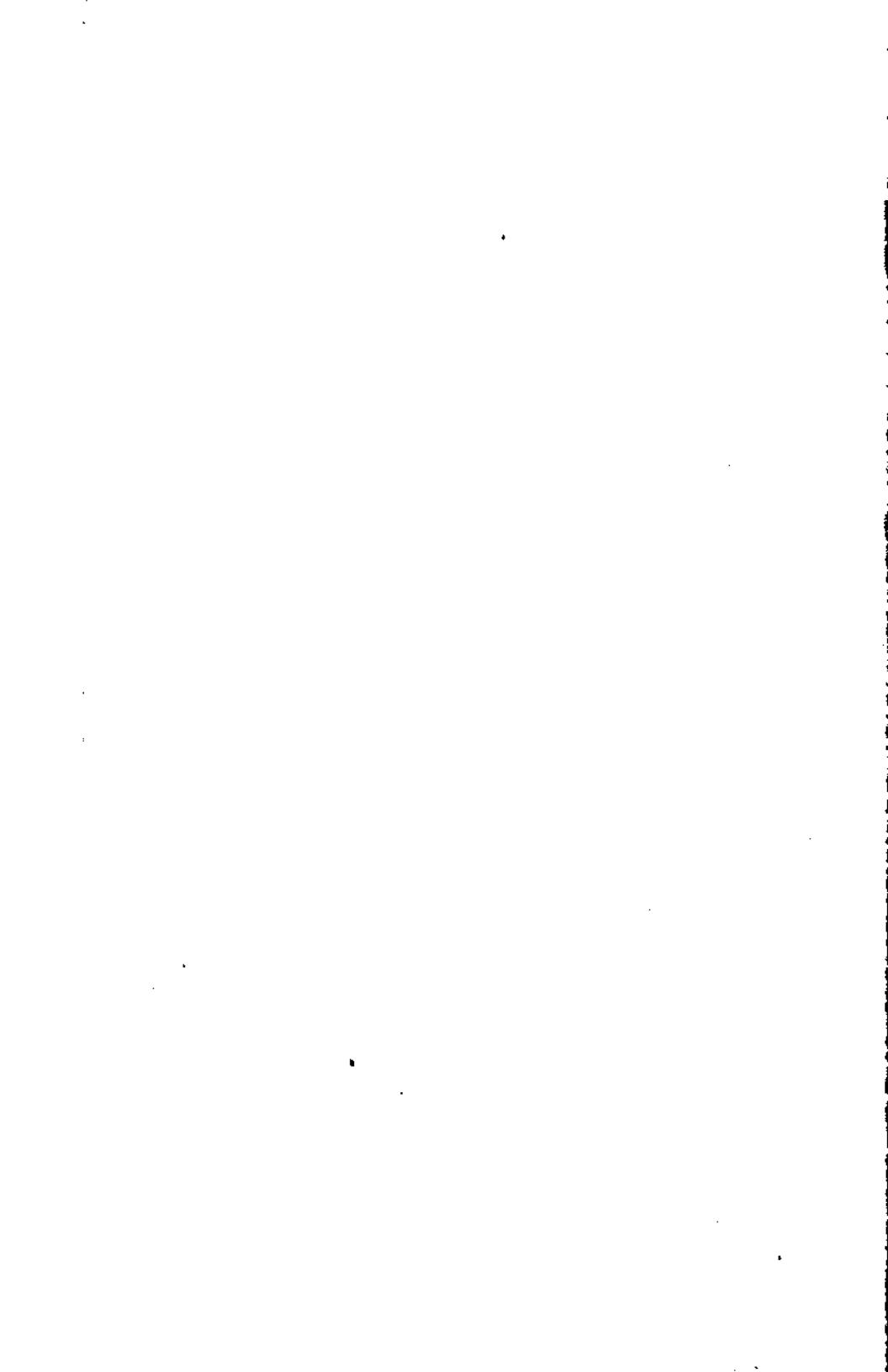
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Theodore Roosevelt: A Tribute to John Charles McNeill

In the Senate Chamber in the State Capitol, Thursday morning, October 19, 1905, President Theodore Roosevelt, representing the North Carolina Literary and Historical Association, presented to John Charles McNeill, of Charlotte, the Patterson Memorial Cup, awarded him for having published during the preceding twelve months work showing "the greatest excellence and the highest literary skill and genius."

The President said:

"Mr. McNeill: I feel, and I am sure all good Americans must feel, that it is far from enough for us to develop merely a great material prosperity...It is indispensable to have the material prosperity as a foundation, but if we think the foundation is the entire building, we shall never rank as among the nations of the world; and therefore it is with particular pleasure that I find myself playing a small part in a movement, such as this, by which one of the thirteen original States, one of our great States, marks its sense of proper proportion in estimating the achievements of life, the achievements of which the Commonwealth has a right to be proud. It is a good thing to have the sense of historic continuity with the past, which we get largely through the efforts of just such historic societies as this, through which this Cup is awarded to you. It is an even better thing to try to do what we can to show our pleasure in and approval of productive literary work in the present. Mr. McNeill, I congratulate you and North Carolina."

*-Quoted from introductory notes in
Lyrics from Cotton Land*

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